新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑭

「やあ、幻想殺し」
「だとすると、アンタは理想送りか？」
世界を何万回でも塵にすることができる真性の『魔神』達。そんな無敵の存在らを、一瞬で消し去る少年がいた。
少年は『どこにでもいる平凡な高校生』にして、しかし同時に最大最悪の『理想送り』を右手に宿す存在。もう一人の『どこにでもいる平凡な男子高校生』上条当麻の『幻想殺し』と、表裏一体でもあった。
少年二人は、学園都市の暗闇で対峙した。
この勝負の鍵を握るのは、レイヴィニアとパトリシア、二人のバードウェイ姉妹で……!?
極大のイレギュラー同士が、ついに激突する……！

か-12-63

新約 とある魔術の禁書目録⑭

鎌池和馬

電撃文庫

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※消費税が別に加算されます

鎌池和馬

気にしているようであんまり気にしていない、照明器具の形。これも上手く盛り込めば作品世界の空気をさりげなく演出できるかも。例えば目のような形にして『常に睨まれている』雰囲気を出したりとか。

【電撃文庫作品】
とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
とある魔術の禁書目録SS①②
新約 とある魔術の禁書目録①～⑭
ヘヴィーオブジェクト シリーズ計十冊
インテリビレッジの座敷童①～⑧
簡単なアンケートです
簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情
未踏召喚：// ブラッドサイン①～③
とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人妃の婚活事情

イラスト：はいむらきよたか

広島の片田舎で、もそもそ絵を描いております。

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録インデックス 14

鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか

【赤と黒の衝突】

学園都市に侵入した、謎の不定形の怪物。赤と黒の二体が確認されているが、それぞれの目的は不明。
赤はかろうじて人型を取っているものの、毛足の長い絨毯を水に吸わせて腐らせたような質感で、鬱蒼と茂る毛足の奥から乱杭歯や舌のように見える何かがチロチロと覗く不気味な姿。
黒は間近で見ても不定で、深海に揺蕩うタコのようにも、包丁で切り分けられたぶよぶよの脂肪の塊にも、たるんだゴムの膜を裏側から炙ったようにも見え、黄色か緑か、ぬめった夜光塗料めいた光を明滅させている姿。
唯一判明しているのは、互いを敵視しぶつかり合っている事だけである。

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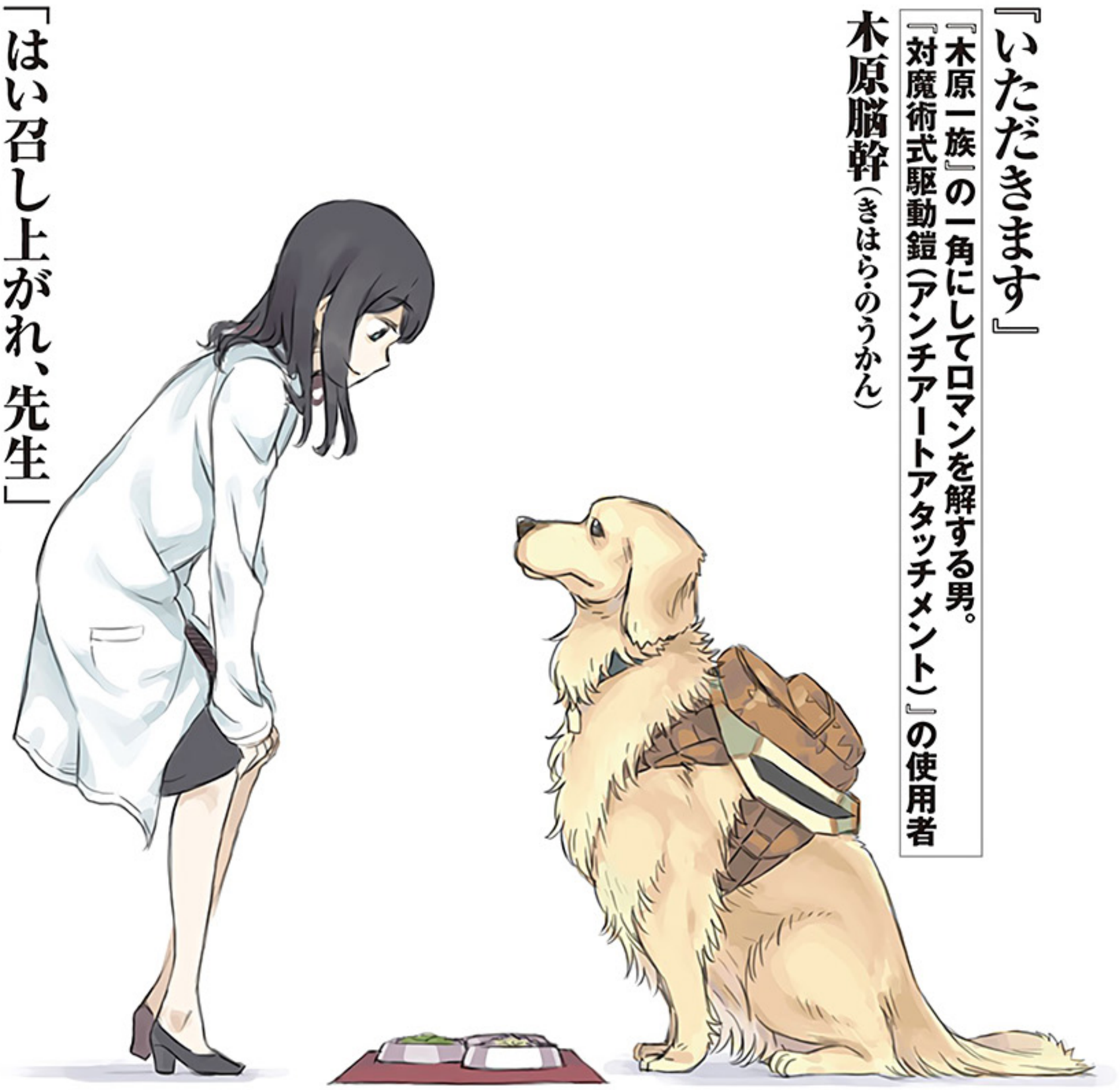
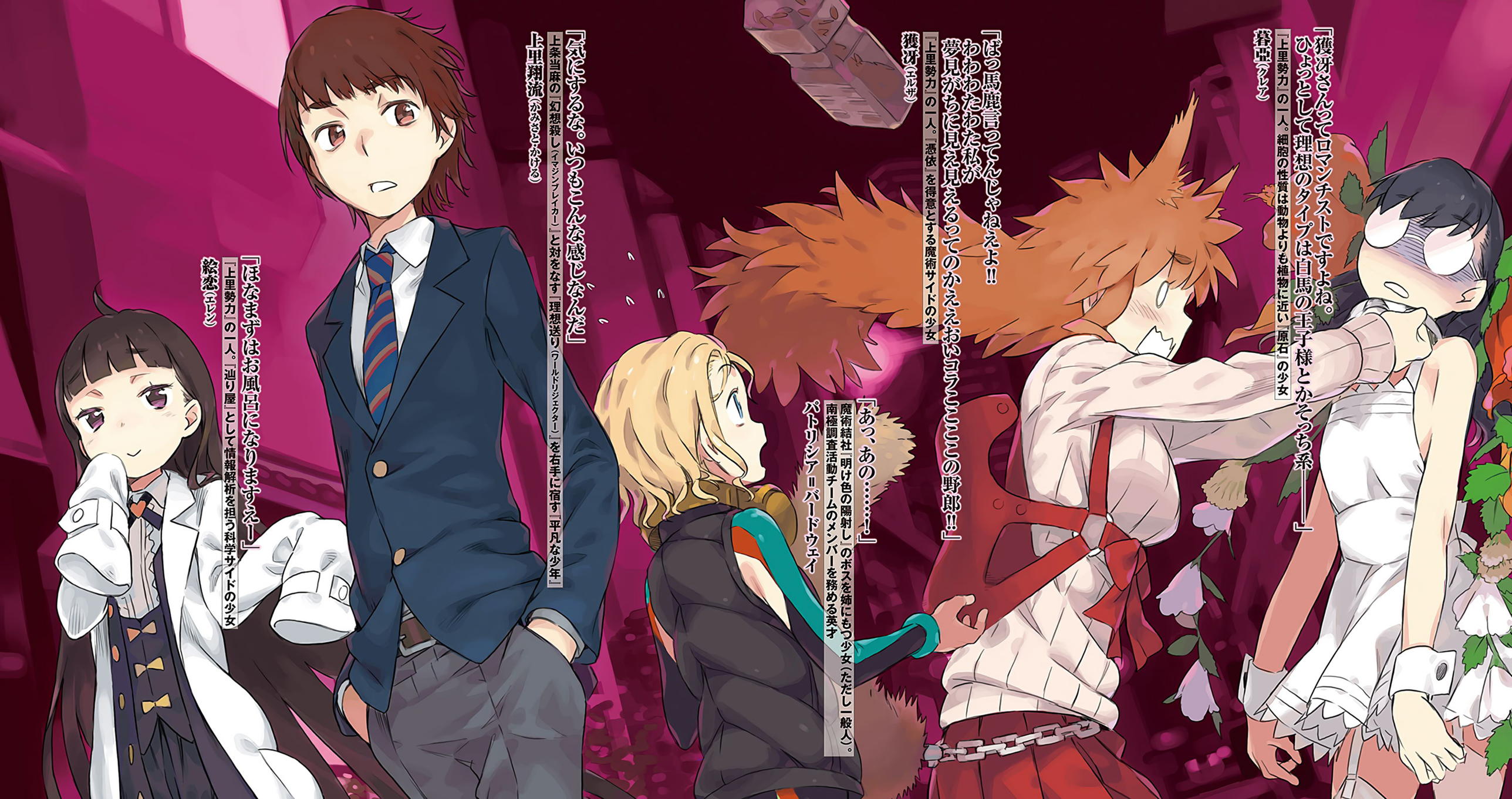


Designed by **H**irokazu **W**atanabe(2725 Inc.)

「バードウェイ、
お前は俺を何だと思っているんだ？？？」
右手に異能ならなんでも打ち消す力を宿す少年
上条当麻（かみじょう・とうま）
「何かあるのかもしれないね」
10万3000冊の魔道書を記憶している純白のシスター
インデックス
「忘れたのか、
お前自身がとびきり不幸だっていう事を」
元グレムリンの『魔神』。上条によって救われたものの、『魔神』としての能力を失った
オティヌス
「上条当麻、お前は絶対に私の胸に触るなと言っているんだ」
魔術結社『明け色の陽射し』のボス
レイヴィニア＝バードウェイ
「はやく、上里翔流の問題へ戻りたいものね」
仲間である『狼々（ニャンニャン）』が上里によって消されたため、
上条宅に逃げてきた『魔神』
ネフテュス


「獲牙さんってロマンチストですよね。
ひょっとして理想のタイプは白馬の王子様とかそっち系――」
「上里勢力」の一人。細胞の性質は動物よりも植物に近い「原石」の少女
暮咲（クレア）
「ばっ馬鹿言ってんじゃねえよ!!
わわわたわた私が
夢見がちに見え見えるってのかええおいコラここここの野郎!!」
「上里勢力」の一人。「憑依」を得意とする魔術サイドの少女
獲牙（エルザ）
「あっ、あの……！」
魔術結社「明け色の陽射し」のボスを姉にもつ少女（ただし一般人）。
南極調査活動チームのメンバーを務める英才
パトリシア＝バードウェイ
「気にするな。いつもこんな感じなんだ」
上条当麻の「幻想殺し（イマジンブレイカー）」と対をなす「理想送り（ワールドリジェクター）」を右手に宿す「平凡な少年」
上里翔流（かみさとかける）
「ほなまずはお風呂になりますえー」
「上里勢力」の一人。「辿り屋」として情報解析を担う科学サイドの少女
絃神（エレン）

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録 インデックス 14

鎌池和馬

イラスト・はいむらきよたか

デザイン・渡邊宏一（2725 Inc.）

PROLOGUE

The Magic God is Now Nearby.

Home_Party?

Last time on New Testament – A Certain Magical Index!!

After somehow managing to escape the threat of the High Priest (an old man mummy and Magic God) and returning alive to the student dorm, a small cardboard box broke open and Magic God Nephthys popped out. (Yes, all of this actually happened.)

"..."

"..."

Inside his twilit dorm room, Kamijou Touma was obediently seated on the wooden flooring.

The Arrowhead Comet aka the High Priest's final attack had caused a lot of damage. The broken window out to the balcony was covered by a plastic sheet as a stopgap measure, but the December chill was still getting in. The High Priest had truly been an unforgivable old man whose high spirits were still causing Kamijou trouble even now.

Inside that chilly room, two figures struck intimidating poses in front of the boy. One was Index, the silver-haired nun wearing a teacup-like white habit with golden stitching, and the other was Othinus, a fifteen centimeter Magic God.

"And?"

"...Yes?"

"Touma, why are you still bringing in new freeloaders? Can you really take care of this many!? Aren't you always complaining that this month's budget is at its limit!?"

"Y'know, I really don't think it's fair to get mad at me for this one. Nephthys shipped herself here in a package! Not even I know what that's all about!!"

Everyone there except Kamijou was a freeloader (including the cat). Othinus gave him a look that said "I don't want to hear that from you". She had recently realized the cat would

not attack her if its stomach was full, so she kicked over the box of pet food to cover the floor with some crunchy chaff.

All she accomplished was covering herself in food and getting attacked all the faster, but Index and Nephthys did not seem to care. They more innocently interpreted it as the cold cat wanting to use the fifteen centimeter girl as a source of heat.

“As I already said, this is a problem for all of you too,” said Nephthys as she struggled to get up with sweat covering her body. “Kamisato Kakeru has shown up. ...If that World Rejecter holds the power to destroy all Magic Gods, your Othinus won’t escape unharmed.”

She was probably trying to be one hundred percent serious, but the horrors of interpretation meant the others only saw a brown beauty whose naked body was covered only by bandages as she got up on all fours in a leopardess pose.

The corners of Index’s eyes rose sharply.

When Kamijou saw the dangerous canine teeth visible in her adorable mouth, he felt all his hair stand on end.

“I’m pretty sure this goes beyond misfortune and counts as just plain unreasonable!”

“Then, Touma, can you swear to god that your thoughts are entirely pure right now?”

“Ahem.”

Averting his gaze and clearing his throat proved to be a poor choice.

He saw an illusion of a thumb flicking up the safety cover on a fighter jet’s control column.

“Toumaaaa!!”

“Eeeeeek! I have to face *this* without a save point or a night at the inn after that crazy-hard High Priest battle!?”

“What’s going to happen to our food if you keep bringing in new freeloaders!? What about tonight’s dinner for example!? I’m not gonna let you take a piece of food away from everyone else to feed the new girrrrrrrrrrlllllllll!!”

“That’s what this is all about!!!???”

Finally finding a way to fight back on the psychological front, Kamijou slid to the side without getting up from his seated position. This did a splendid job of dodging Index’s attack.

Yes, Kamijou Touma was quite capable when he put his mind to it.

It was enough to handle World War III if need be.

“Bgyahn!!”

“I won’t lend you my hand, Index. If you’re a capable girl, then stand on your own two feet.”

Still, it was evening. Kamijou was too exhausted to want to do any kind of housework, but no food would show up if no one did anything.

“Listen, Index. When things get tough, we just have to rely on the tried-and-true hotpot. The cost per person drops the more people you have and it facilitates conversation since everyone eats from the same pot! I don’t know what brought Nephthys here, but it’s obvious ignoring it would be a bad idea. Besides, I’m about to freeze here! Why did the window have to break during December!? Just how much of a pain in the ass are you, High Priest!? So let’s do this! Let’s gather everything we’ve got to make some random hotpot!!”

“I won’t let you just make ‘some random’ thing! You only get three meals a day, so you have to put your body and soul into making each one!!”

“Then how about you start making them, Index!?”

Kamijou shouted back with this already pointy hair standing further on end.

When he arrived in front of the fridge, Othinus spoke up while being assaulted by the cat’s rough tongue.

“Do you really have the ingredients for a hotpot, or anything else for that matter?”

“Don’t underestimate the cheap meals of a student, Othinus. If I wanted to, I could turn some scraps of pork and a cabbage core into a delicious-...”

He trailed off as soon as he opened the fridge.

He was dumbfounded by what he saw inside.

“...Index.”

“What is it, Touma?”

“I distinctly remember stocking up at that sale three days ago. So why is there nothing but soy sauce and miso in the fridge?”

“Ahem.”

Averting her gaze and clearing her throat proved to be a poor choice.

Kamijou Touma felt like a narrow circuit in his head had just fried.

“Why yooooooooooooooooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!!”

Today’s Hotpot Party, Ingredients List 1

Soy sauce. Miso.

(Quick Memo)

Kamijou Touma: “Personally, I think some dashi and plain miso soup would be fine.”

Othinus: “That would not be fine.”

Index: “Even the hot water miso soup at a gyudon place has more than that.”

Kamijou Touma: “...”

CHAPTER 1

Imagine Breaker and World Rejecter.

One_Night_Encount.

Part 1

The contents of the fridge were devastating. They were even bleaker than the chill entering through the broken window. They could not cook what they did not have, so they set aside the prospect of a hotpot for the time being.

“So what is this about a Kamisato? In fact, why are you so weak? Aren’t you a god?”

“That’s not a nice thing to say, but I sadly can’t deny it.”

This seemed like it would be a long conversation, so they had moved to the kotatsu. Nephthys only sat it up and stuck her legs under the blanket, so it was obvious even this was difficult for her.

It was hard to believe she was one of those arrogant Magic Gods.

A Magic God would never want to show any weakness to a human, so seeing her worn-down strength and worn-down speed was enough for Kamijou to relax his guard.

(She...)

He was not a magic expert or a Magic God, but he could tell.

Even a human could see it.

Nephthys did not have the power to fight. She had so little strength left that a puny human crawling on the surface of the earth could look down on her.

(She must have nothing left...)

How painful for a Magic God was it to be thought of that way?

Othinus had used her full strength to the end and the High Priest had laughed until his final breath, so he could imagine what she had to feel like right now. Still, she had swallowed all that shame and come here.

Whatever was underway was worth doing that.

She was unable to support her upper body, so she sat up with her upper body sprawled out on the kotatsu. Then the silver-haired woman with chocolate-colored skin and bandages wrapped around her started to speak.

“Niang-Niang is dead. So are all the other Magic Gods.”

“Eh!?”

“No, saying she’s dead might not be accurate. She took a direct hit from Kamisato Kakeru’s World Rejecter and was sent to a ‘new world’. As long as we remain in the current world, I doubt we will ever see her again. In that way, she might as well have crossed the Sanzu River or the Lethe River. You can just think of it as death if you want.”

Just a few hours before, he might have rejected it as nonsense.

The Magic Gods were the greatest threat and nothing would be better than to have them gone, yet he would have rejected the idea because it sounded too good to be true.

But now, he did not.

Her frail state was enough to know this was not a joke.

But something else caught his interest even more.

“Wait a second. I’m a little confused since you mentioned a bunch of new terms. Kamisato? World Rejecter? The other Magic Gods were sent to a new world??? What on earth is going on? And...”

He hesitated to continue.

“And you say Niang-Niang was taken out?”

“It’s true.”

“But how do you know? If you ran across this Kamisato, then why did only you survive?”

“Not even I know.” Nephthys struggled to breathe as she answered. “The next thing I knew, a special power other than Imagine Breaker had crystallized and Kamisato Kakeru was wielding it. I have no idea why he obtained World Rejecter or why he attacked us Magic Gods. But I do know that boy has the power to harvest Magic Gods.”

“That boy?”

Othinus, another Magic God, spoke up from the side.

This was a being that killed Magic Gods instead of persuading them, so she must have had trouble believing it existed.

But Nephthys’s lips belatedly curled into a mocking smile while her long silver hair dangled down.

“Yes...that boy. Kamisato Kakeru looked like the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere. I don’t even know whether he’s an Academy City student or not. He had incredibly plain features. He might have been even more average than Kamijou Touma. At the very least, he didn’t seem to have years of high-level military training, years spent in a magic cabal, or any unique physical features like those of a Saint.”

“Then what is this World Rejecter thing?”

“Just like with Imagine Breaker, he was probably simply chosen by the world’s lottery. But I don’t believe Imagine Breaker ended up in you by random chance. I still believe that the dreams of all magicians were drawn in by the shining soul of the person bearing the true name of the One who Purifies Gods and Slays Demons. ...In that case, there must be something inside Kamisato Kakeru as well. Something unique that drew in World Rejecter.”

“But what is it?” asked Kamijou while looking down at his own right hand. “What is World Rejecter? Is it some kind of special power like mine???”

“Yes, although it would be wrong to think of Imagine Breaker in the same way as Academy City’s powers.” Nephthys sounded somewhat exasperated. “Have you ever heard that Imagine Breaker is a gathering of the dreams held by all of those who use magic? They would love to change the world as they see fit, but they’re afraid of messing everything up in the process. So they wanted a clear restoration point or reference point they could use to restore everything if needed. The meter, the kilogram, degrees Celsius, the periodic table, and more. Your right hand functions as an unchanging standard for all units.”

It was a confusing way of putting it, but he was pretty sure Ollerus had said something similar.

Imagine Breaker was a safety that had gathered the dreams of all magicians.

That definition had even been at the heart of his battle with the full-powered Othinus. Kamijou could only rejoice that he was back in the “original world” because Othinus had used that restoration point.

“I haven’t checked on any of the details, but based on what Kamisato himself said, there is a connection between the origins of Imagine Breaker and World Rejecter.”

“?”

“Imagine Breaker protects, restores, and clings to the existing world. It is a collection of that ideal.”

While wrapped in her bandages, Nephthys breathed the heated breath of the sickly.

“The World Rejecter inside Kamisato’s right hand is the exact opposite. His hand has the ability to cast his target into a ‘new world’ and erase their existence. In other words, it abandons and gives up on the current world to take a trip to another world. It is a collection of that illusion.”

“I see.”

Othinus was the first to speak up.

As a fellow Magic God, she had a better common understanding with Nephthys than did Index, who sat at the stage before becoming a Magic God. That allowed her to catch on more quickly.

“Imagine Breaker was the dreams of all magicians, but did some power escape it? Did some percentage of ‘all magicians’ subconsciously doubt they would truly be safe if they continued relying on Imagine Breaker as it is?”

“It goes without saying, but 99.9% of the magic side’s total power is held by us Magic Gods. We may be a minority in numbers, but each one of us has far, far more power. The human magic side covers half the world, yet it cannot match even the tip of one of our hairs.”

“In other words, World Rejecter appeared inside this Kamisato because you all were disappointed in Kamijou Touma. Hah hah! I can see why he would hold a grudge. It’s like a cell being devoured by the apoptosis it created!! Did you enjoy getting the entire world caught up in your suicide!?”

“Should you really be laughing? We in the true Gremlin started doubting Kamijou Touma when he left his path to save all Magic Gods by gaining an understanding of you personally. In other words, none of this would have happened if not for your actions. All of the chaos since the end of the World War III, including today, can be blamed on your selfishness.”

“…”

“…”

Murderous gazes briefly clashed between fifteen centimeter Othinus and sweaty Nephthys who could not even support her own upper body.

Kamijou was the one who tried to break the strained atmosphere.

“Hey, wait! Let’s not fight here. Besides, Othinus, you’d be crushed by a single swat of the hand, so why are you so ready to pick fights with people!?”

“Is that any way to speak to a god?”

“Ow! Don’t poke me in the meridian with that skewer!! Anyway, two girls in a serious fight is the last thing I want to see. Just imagining it feels like having a fishing hook solidly lodged in my soul.”

That put a bitter look on both Othinus and Nephthys’s faces.

It was the look of someone who had ordered a small dessert after dinner and had a cake the size of a wedding cake brought out to them.

“Um... Girls, huh?”

“This is a good example of how things can surprise you even after becoming a god. The world is a large place.”

He was not sure why, but a lull came over them.

He made sure to use this chance to get back on topic.

“I get that you Magic Gods have high-spec minds, but could you slow down to a level a human like me can understand?”

Othinus snorted.

“I don’t see how getting you to understand this would help.”

“You’re in full S mode again, aren’t you?”

“It’s true. All you need to know is that this Kamisato Kakeru person has an irregular ability just as cheap as Imagine Breaker and the two of you might clash in the near future.”

“Oh? That doesn’t seem like enough of an explanation to me. In fact, it seems a little unfair to him.”

“You’re the one that came here intending to get him involved. Are you going to play innocent while rolling around in his bed? Besides, what I said was accurate. Right, Kamijou Touma? If you could avoid any trouble with Kamisato Kakeru by throwing Nephthys and me out in the cold, would you be able to do that?”

The pointy-haired boy was caught off guard by the question.

And without a second's thought, he answered as he always did.

"*What are you talking about? Of course I couldn't do that.*"

After having argued over this point, Othinus and Nephthys could only sigh at almost the same moment.

Sounding utterly exasperated, the one who understood him spoke.

"See? That's the kind of guy he is."

"I see. Someone this abnormal probably would have been perfect as our scorer."

Kamijou did not like how they were talking about him and he turned to Index for some support, but she turned away in a huff.

Then, Othinus gave the final announcement.

"If that's your intention, you can't get careless, human. Until now, you've gotten through everything making full use of the blessings brought by your right hand. As all kinds of normal threats opposed you, you achieved an unexpected victory using that abnormal power. But this will be different."

"?"

"Your opponent's power is just as abnormal. You can no longer fight like a joker taking on a group of aces and kings. This is a joker against a joker. In a way, it's even harder to predict than a clash between two aces. You've never experienced something like this before, so you can't predict what's going to happen based on your accumulated experience. If you don't focus your mind, *you could easily end up dead in a way that ignores all the rules you've seen before*."

Part 2

In a luxury apartment, Kihara Yuiitsu, a woman in a cheap suit and lab coat, violently banged a spatula against a frying pan.

"Sensei!! Dinner's ready!"

Drawn by her voice, a golden retriever trotted across the wooden flooring. He immediately began speaking using an artificial voice.

“Sorry you always have to go to all this trouble. Even if we are master and apprentice, I don’t think you have any obligation to go this far, yet I still have you do it.”

“Oh, honestly! What are you talking about? I can’t have someone as esteemed as you eating the ready-made pet food they sell at bargain prices! That stuff is junk! They get lazy with the ingredients because they know people aren’t eating it!!”

A small silk mat was laid out on the floor with a small bowl on top of it. The main dish was ground pork mixed with some grains and lightly stir-fried with moderate flavoring from salt and oil. She did not know what it was called, but it had become her specialty dish because Kihara Noukan seemed to like it.

There was also a small bowl of water that had been boiled to remove the chlorine and a salad to provide a few nutrients that would otherwise be lacking.

The golden retriever summed up the meal with a single phrase.

“Such romance.”

“Um...?”

She was confused.

She did not seem to realize that was the highest praise he could give.

But ignoring the food someone had made went against Kihara Noukan’s personal style. It was only polite to focus on the meal during mealtime. He could always explain what he meant after savoring the food.

He did not take this environment for granted and spoke words filled with the utmost thanks.

“Time to eat.”

“Yes, eat up, sensei.”

He was a man with an understanding of romance, but he did not use his robot arm at times like this. He shoved his face into the bowl and devoured the food while making plenty of noise. Table manners were meant to allow everyone to enjoy their meal, so demonstrating one’s enjoyment of the food was more important than unnecessary formality. He viewed this as the ultimate etiquette toward the one who had cooked it.

It may not have even taken him a full ten minutes to finish the meal.

And he did not fail to thank the one who had prepared this special day for him.

“Thank you for the meal.”

“Huh? You’re done already!? But I only just started on my salad!”

“Sorry. I know I should have matched my pace to yours, but to be honest, your cooking is just that good.”

“O-oh, dear. I’m going to blush. What do I do? Should I make you more?”

“No, there is no need for that. I am an old dog and I need to be careful about how much I eat.”

“Mhh. But eating on your own is boring.”

“I am still here. I will be taking a short nap, though.”

Kihara Noukan lay down next to Kihara Yuiitsu’s seat at the table.

The pleasant warmth of the heater was making him feel a little sleepy.

“Come to think of it,” she said. “You were quite busy ordering maintenance, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“You stopped that Arrowhead Comet from falling... but you said it isn’t over, didn’t you?”

“It smells quite fishy. It bothers me that all of the Magic Gods hiding in Academy City vanished.”

They had vanished.

As their deaths had not actually been confirmed, there was still a possibility that the Magic Gods were hiding somewhere. Kihara Noukan simply had a bad feeling about where this was headed.

It felt like the night before the bubble burst.

Or before a natural disaster, a war, or an oil crisis. The details did not particularly matter.

He felt a sense of impatience. It was like he was standing on a path whose width fluctuated but could still be seen down, until one day it suddenly changed entirely.

He told Kihara Yuiitsu nothing of this.

This went beyond logic and efficiency, so a pure Kihara would never understand.

Or perhaps this man who understood romance was picking up something on that antenna.

Part 3

He felt bad doing so while Magic Gods like Othinus and Nephthys were discussing what sounded like the end of the world, but Kamijou Touma interrupted anyway.

“We seem to be trying to avoid looking at reality with all this complicated stuff, but the fridge is still empty. We can’t do anything else until we deal with that.”

Nephthys gave her blunt opinion while resting her upper body on the kotatsu in a way that squished her large breasts.

“You’re weird.”

“Oh, shut up, you new freeloader. So what’s this about? Kamisato? I don’t know what’s going to happen, but whether we’re holing up here or leaving, we need food. I don’t want to have to hunt down some food while half-starved later.”

“Touma! Then we’re going shopping, right!? By this time, the supermarket’s meals will have half-off stickers all over them! I’m so excited!!”

“We’re having a hotpot, so we don’t need any pre-made meals!! And this isn’t a sale that puts a limit of one egg carton per person, so I don’t need any help. Besides, if we go walking around outside, we might run across that Kamisato guy! You need to take this seriously!!”

“How can you accuse others of not taking this seriously when you’re heading out to buy hotpot ingredients when you could run into a monster who easily defeated a group of Magic Gods with a single right hand? And let’s not forget that your right hand is probably an important target too.”

“But Magic Gods like us are probably the most important targets.”

Othinus charged at Nephthys who crushed her below her hand.

But without any food, waiting for death was their only option whether Kamisato was on his way or not. Poor Student Kamijou Touma could not use anything as bourgeois as a convenience store or supermarket delivery service, so he had to leave the dorm room despite the risk. He was not about to say money was everything, but he had to cry in his heart at how the lack of it limited one’s options.

And so...

“I’ll be heading out. Index, you look after the place with the others. Listen, don’t just open the door if the doorbell rings. Check through the lens and pretend you aren’t home if you don’t recognize them. Do you understand, Index?”

“Touma, how old do you think I am?”

He answered her question with silence. He had grown enough to know what fate awaited him if he honestly answered that he was pretty sure someone could lure her into a back alley with some candy.

Fifteen centimeter Othinus put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“Hey.”

“Don’t worry. This is a big city. What are the odds of running across a particular person while just walking around?”

“Have you forgotten how ridiculous your misfortune can get?”

“But we won’t last until morning on miso, soy sauce, and water. We’ll start wondering what it even is we’re fighting.”

He left the girls in the dorm room and found the sun just about to fall below the horizon. The night was more purple than orange and it had grown quite dark. The bright stars visible here and there were gradually growing in number.

At the same time, he knew the lights of electronic signs and building windows would start to come on and quickly erase all sign of the stars that should have filled the sky.

(How should I put it...?)

Kamijou thought to himself as he walked along a main road lit by streetlights.

(I was too panicked to notice before, but the High Priest really made a mess of things.)

Even now, he could see signs of that Magic God’s rampage. Construction vehicles were moving crushed cars out of the way, triangular cones and tape were placed around giant holes, buildings were unnaturally tilted, every window was broken, and shards of glass covered the road and sidewalk. Truly, truly, truly, if anything had gone just a little bit wrong, everyone in the city might have been caught in the downpour of glass and covered everything in blood.

But Kamijou did not think he had somehow fixed everything.

He had cornered the High Priest, but that had only brought Academy City even closer to destruction. In the end, it had not been him who finished off the Magic God after he fused with the giant comet. It had been a mysterious light fired from the ground.

What had that been?

2.3 million people lived in Academy City and they had all tried to protect the city in their own way. One of them had likely settled things in some way Kamijou was unaware of, but...

"Your thoughts are taking a turn for the worse again, aren't they?"

He suddenly heard a girl's voice.

He turned toward it and found fifteen centimeter Othinus's head poking out from his pants pocket.

"You!!"

"Don't look so surprised at everything I do. Aren't you supposed to understand me?"

"Eh? Ehh? Did you have your head sticking out this whole time? The whole time!? Wait a minute. Anyone who saw that probably thought I was walking around with a figurine girl in my pock-...gogyahh!?"

"..."

"Wait...you idiot...just cause you're in my pants pocket...doesn't mean you should knee me there..."

Kamijou leaned forward due to the attack, but the details will be omitted to preserve his honor.

Othinus gave a snort and started climbing up Kamijou's coat.

"I just don't feel at home when I'm not on your shoulder."

"Uuh... Please hide inside my scarf."

"More importantly," casually cut in Othinus. "You weren't considering a redefinition of 'Kamijou Touma' just because you weren't the one to solve that problem, were you? You weren't *thinking you might have been able to handle that situation if only you had some kind of new power*, were you?"

"..."

“Give up on that idea. Would you be able to save more people if you trained in martial arts? Would you be able to resolve things more smartly if you had a gun or a knife? *That would have the exact opposite effect.* The more means of killing you have and the farther you move from the path that saves your opponent using their own power, the weaker you will become. That alone is certain. You might not like having someone else act like they understand you, but as someone who was saved by you, I do understand.”

Kamijou had nothing to say to that.

For one thing, he had not realized his own true value. Of course, that lack of realization was itself his strength, so that was not surprising.

“Human, where do you think evil comes from?”

“?”

“Don’t bother giving me the textbook answer. Tell me the honest opinion that first comes to mind. Surely you aren’t going to give me some whitewashed answer about the dualism of good and evil. Haven’t you learned firsthand that this world is not simple enough to just divide things between angels and demons?”

Good was not good because someone decided it was.

Evil was not evil because it said so in some book.

Kamijou Touma did as Othinus said and gave his honest opinion.

“*Does true evil even exist?*”

“Hah hah!! Now that’s a question I would expect from you. And you’re close. Evil is created when someone gives up on someone else. It appears when everyone gives up on someone as a lost cause and removes their path to salvation. Once they are cut off from everyone else, they become evil. Just look through history and you’ll understand. What is the difference between a murderer who kills a single person and a great hero who kills one million? It has nothing to do with the person himself. It comes down to whether everyone else accepts him. It’s an issue of majority rule.”

When someone gave up on someone and they become cut off from everyone else, they became evil.

Thinking back to the mess from Tokyo Bay to Denmark, there may have been some self-deprecation in that girl’s words. It was true that the world had given up on her, but she had given up on the world first.

“Martial arts, a gun, a knife, or any other obvious offensive power would only increase your ability to ‘cut people off’. You would be no different from the cruel agents of revenge who delight in robbing people of a chance to reform and then tossing the majority rule loser into the abyss, all while calling it a punishment. Kamijou Touma, that is not your strength. Your greatest weapon is the powerful arm that reached into the abyss and saved even someone as hopelessly evil and rotten to the core as Magic God Othinus. That ability to connect is your ultimate trump card, so make no mistake and do not reach for a cheap answer. You couldn’t defeat the High Priest? This Kamisato guy wiped out all of those Magic Gods? You should be asking ‘so what’. You should be looking down on Academy City for letting the High Priest die and on Kamisato for killing the Magic Gods without saving a single one. What is wanted from you is not violence on the same level as World Rejecter. It isn’t the power to kill. It is the power of human reason that can envelop that violence.”

After hearing that, Kamijou Touma smiled.

He had still been fighting the High Priest. Something had not been sitting well with him and it had filled his chest with worries. But he felt like he finally knew what it was.

The High Priest had been truly awful.

He had left his mark on every part of Academy City.

But now Kamijou wished he had listened more to what he said and learned more about him as a person. If he had, something might have changed like it had with Othinus. But now it was too late.

The High Priest had been evil, but that was because Kamijou Touma had made him evil. He had done so by giving up on saving him.

How much did Nephthys know of the non-evil side of that old man?

He knew he was giving over to sentiment, but he was curious.

“You really do understand me,” he said.

“Why mention that now? Do you want to reconfirm what that means?”

Othinus made it sound obvious and the pointy-haired boy smiled again. This time it was a self-conscious one filled with enjoyment.

The supermarket was close.

He entered the air-conditioned shop and grabbed a basket near the entrance. He followed the aisle and checked around the fresh foods section, but he did not go for the most delicious looking meats and vegetables. When Othinus saw what he threw in the basket, she spoke up in disappointment.

“I understand it’s cheaper, but can’t you give some thought to how it looks? Why are you only grabbing the wilted vegetables?”

“Shut up. We’re having a hotpot, remember? It’s all going to be boiled in the water, so it doesn’t matter if they’ve gone a little bad.”

“What kind of hotpot are you planning, anyway? There are a lot of options including pot-au-feu and cheese fondue.”

“Oh, I was thinking of playing it safe and going with a mizutaki. Boiled tofu is actually the easiest, but that would never satisfy a growing girl like Index and she’d definitely throw a fit.”

Kamijou selected some cheap packaged tofu and shirataki, but Othinus seemed confused.

“I don’t know much about Japanese food, but, um, mizutaki? Doesn’t that mean it’s cooked in plain water!? That sounds incredibly bland, but it does have some kind of flavor, right!?”

“That’s the problem with you crazy Westerners who insist fries are a vegetable. Just watch. When Poor Student Kamijou Touma goes all out, it’ll knock your socks off.”

“It doesn’t really matter, but fries are a traditional food of the Northern European nation of Belgium and they’re even trying to register them as a world heritage item. If you start treating it like a cheap junk food, I’ll cast a curse on you.”

“Gyah! Don’t stick your tiny arm in my ear! Who would’ve thought I’d learn about a god’s favorite food here!?”

A chill ran down Kamijou’s spine as tiny fingers tickled him near the eardrum.

Once the god’s curse was complete, Othinus pulled her hand out and spoke.

“And when it comes to food, you can’t go wrong with herring.”

“Hm?”

“Oh? Is that not a universal thing? In the Norse regions, you throw herring into just about any kind of home cooking.”

“Othinus, I don’t know too much about foreign countries, but I get the feeling you’re mocking those Norse cultures more than I am.”

“I am the head Norse god, you know? Do you really think I do housework?”

“I guess it takes a god to be so proud of that one. A human certainly couldn’t.”

He gathered up some cheap fatty meat and some wilted vegetables that would grow in size once they soaked up the water.

“By the way, does Nephthys have any food taboos? She is a god.”

“I feel like Egyptian mythology is pretty accepting of anything.”

“Come to think of it, I heard on TV that people in hot areas like Africa and South America really like sweet things. It’s apparently because they need the extra nutrients. If I have the money, maybe I should get some fresh fruit...no, that would be too expensive. I’ll just get some canned fruit and vanilla ice cream. Chop that up and it should make for a decent looking dessert. Girls like that kind of thing, right?”

“I may not be one to talk, but you’re really calling that monster a girl? And you might be trying to put her in a good mood, but you should probably give some more thought to the relationship between girls and calories.”

“Eh? Why? Index always seems happy with it.”

He tilted his head and Othinus sighed on his shoulder.

“Let’s get back to the main dish. If you’re worried, go with chicken or fish. Pretty much anyone can eat those. I think only Japanese Buddhists don’t.”

“Eh!? Japan doesn’t!?”

“All of Buddhism is against killing and thanks to syncretism, Shinto tends to view eating meat as impure. Beef, pork, chicken, snake, venison, monkey, horse, rabbit, bear, fish, eggs, bugs, and any other animal protein that requires killing is off limits. I think the really strict ones even don’t allow pesticides when growing vegetables. You don’t find precepts that strict very often even when you look at the entire world. Of course, it ranks near the bottom when it comes to how many people actually follow the rules. I get the idea behind vegetarianism, but it seems like an impossible demand given how our bodies are made.”

As they discussed that, they moved from the chilled fresh foods section to the spices section.

“The world’s stinkiest canned food is from Europe and it used herring.”

“You mean that one that comedians have to eat during punishment games and end up nearly barfing!? The one in the thick can all swollen with gas!? Please stop or I’ll start imagining it!!”

“It keeps fermenting inside the can, so there’s really no point in canning it. The microbes are constantly advancing the decomposition process, so the fish rots right there in the can.”

“Wow!! I’d thought natto and maggot cheese were bad, but whoever ate that first was a real hero!!”

“There are some mysterious foods that really do make you wonder what kind of history led to that showing up on the dinner table. ...And sadly, as weird as it seems, you still end up trying it and end up hooked on it.”

They made their way into the spices section.

There was a lot available, but...

“Now that I think about it, the kitchen was even worse than I realized. There wasn’t even any salt or sugar. What has Index been doing during the day?”

“Do you really want to know just how much someone who can’t cook abandoned her humanity to disguise her hunger?”

“Never mind. I don’t want to know. It’s like seeing a girl putting on makeup. It feels like something valuable is going to crumble away.”

“Anyway, the spices.”

“Right. Mizutaki usually has chicken broth powder, but with such an international group, maybe I should try bouillon or consommé to make it more Western.”

“If you’re making changes, you could use curry powder too.”

“Oh? You know about curry, Othinus?”

“Don’t mock European curry. We have one eaten with rice just like the Japanese.”

“That sounds like a case of reverse importation... But curry is a tricky dead-end. It tastes good enough no matter who makes it, but it’s really hard to get it to taste much better no matter who makes it. Let’s go with something else.”

He decided to go with bouillon for the main flavoring with salt, sugar, and pepper added in.

“I see you’re playing it safe. They have some ethnic foods over there. Why not be more adventurous and try some coriander or tom yum?”

“I’d be afraid of someone not liking it. Besides, I have no idea what an Egyptian god like Nephthys likes. What did she eat in the BC times?”

They also argued on whether to finish it off with rice or champon noodles, but the noodles side won this time. Buying a packaged ingredient had poor cost performance, but he was not about to lug a bag of rice back so soon after the exhausting High Priest fight.

While checking out at the register, Kamijou realized he had forgotten his reusable shopping bag and grew slightly depressed.

“Hey, hero, do you really have to be kind to the planet now?”

“That’s not it, Othinus. They stamp your point card each time you refuse their bags...”

“You really are rushing down the path of the househusband, aren’t you?”

“This would have been the final stamp on the card and I’d been planning to use it to get a buttered baked potato without the others knowing.”

“Baked potato!? That sounds delicious! Let’s go get that reusable bag!!”

Othinus was surprisingly excited about the food, but that was not due to her stomach like it was for Index. She was more focused on wanting a relaxing meal with him without the cat interrupting, but the pointy-haired idiot was of course oblivious to that fact.

Kamijou left the supermarket with plastic bags in both hands and Othinus on his shoulder.

It was after sundown in December, so his breath was visibly white.

“I’m kind of surprised.”

“About what, human?”

“That the supermarket is running like normal. Not long ago, the High Priest fused with a comet and was about to crash into Academy City. Sure, someone stopped it, but it still blew up in midair and shattered all the glass around here. The world is surprisingly sturdy.”

“It’s like I was telling you: you don’t have to carry it all by yourself. There isn’t just one pillar supporting the world. It isn’t about what kind of realistic power anyone has and you shouldn’t give up just because you don’t have anything. Even if they don’t have much – if anything at all – everyone is doing their best to live their lives even now.”

“Perhaps.”

Kamijou smiled a little.

There was no need for him to carry everything himself. He was partially smiling at that thought, but he also thought it was a huge step forward for Magic God Othinus, who had repeatedly created the world and returned it to normal, to use the word “everyone”.

But then he heard a footstep in the darkness.

That quiet sound seemed to flip a switch for the world.

Something invisible had repainted everything in an instant.

He felt a prickling sensation that something was wrong.

“(Othinus.)”

“(Yes, I can feel it too, human.)”

She spoke as they came to a stop and stared cautiously down the dark street.

“(*This enjoyable outing just came to an end*.)”

A silhouette stood less than ten meters away.

They could not see any details, but whoever it was could apparently see them. An entirely calm voice reached them.

“Hi, Imagine Breaker.”

“Then I take it you’re World Rejecter?”

“Ha ha. If you know that name, I can only assume Nephthys really did end up with you.”

“And what if she did?”

Thick tension filled the darkness.

This was not an issue of strong or weak. Both of their right hands were abnormal and their irregularity ate into that space. The presence of a single joker was already a serious error, but two of them were butting heads here. The world seemed to be crying out to say it could not endure this.

“Yes, what should I do?” pondered the silhouette.

“…”

“I have business with the Magic Gods. The Magic Gods who *made me like this*.”

“That’s your business. It has nothing to do with me.”

“True. You don’t need to worry about it in the slightest.”

He readily admitted it, but...

“And that is exactly why...”

He continued smoothly as if all of this were following the pre-established harmony and then he gave his conclusion.

“I don’t need to worry about you in the slightest.”

A brilliant light illuminated everything for just an instant.

It was apparently the headlights of a car turning from a different road. Like a nearby lightning strike during a blackout, the entire scene was burned into Kamijou’s retinas.

Two boys stood in that world.

They both had average facial features and would quickly blend into a crowd.

They were the kind of normal high school boys one could find anywhere.

Kamijou Touma dropped the plastic bags to the ground and tightly clenched his right fist.

The light vanished, but darkness was not allowed to resume its reign.

The two boys began to move as if to tear apart that black world.

Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru.

Those two great irregularities finally clashed.

Today’s Hotpot Party, Ingredients List 2

Soy sauce. Miso.

Chicken breast, daikon, bok choy, cabbage, bean sprouts, shirataki, tofu.

Bouillon, salt, sugar, pepper, champon noodles

Bargain vanilla ice cream, canned yellow peaches, canned pineapple, canned mandarin oranges. (For dessert)

(Quick Memo)

Index: “I hope Touma gets back soon. I wonder what he’s bought for the hotpot!”

Nephthys: “I’m not used to Japanese cuisine, so I’m not sure I can use chopsticks very well. I should probably start practicing.”

Othinus: “Why would you throw the bags of food away?”

Kamijou Touma: “This is a matter of life or death!! Do you want me to fight with bags in my hands!?”

Between the Lines 1

Nephthys was a goddess from Egyptian mythology, but there was a large question concerning her origin. Stories of the deity by that name were extremely rare. When Osiris, an extremely important god in Egyptian mythology, died, all living things around the world wept at his funeral. The “weeping goddess” that represented that event was Nephthys.

There are no other materials referencing Nephthys and it is unknown when and where she was born.

For that reason, one theory says she did not come about naturally and that she was an artificial deity created to emphasize that story about Osiris.

Amid all that, no one knows anymore if that truly was Nephthys.

Not even Nephthys herself.

But there is a certain story.

...There’s no room.

...I can’t breathe.

...This was all a way for the pharaoh to show off.

One of the most famous parts of Egyptian mythology was the pyramids that acted as the pharaohs' tombs.

And there was one way of thinking that can be seen in many different cultures around the world: sealing many servants inside the king's tomb to make sure the king has no trouble in the afterlife.

The number of servants could reach the hundreds or even the thousands.

It was not that someone went around and dragged struggling girls from their families by the hair. They all willingly volunteered to serve the pharaoh. But in truth, it was unclear whether they actually could have refused.

For those burying them, it was all over once the exit was sealed, but for those buried, the end took its time in coming.

Humans can last for two or three days without drinking a drop of water.

If they bit into the cloth of the burial goods or found some other way to gain some moisture, it was possible for them to live over a week.

For those closed inside, the end took its time in coming.

It took a long, long time. Enough that they would begin begging for it to come sooner.

And as that seemingly never-ending series of moments passed, someone had a thought.

They did not want their life to have been a waste. They were not dead yet and they did not want their thinking existence to waste away to nothing.

And there were hundreds if not thousands there.

They checked through their fragments of knowledge, the pieces of the mysteries they knew, and the papyrus buried with the pharaoh so he could be resurrected.

And once they gathered it all together...

Deep in a certain pyramid, that brown goddess was born surrounded by countless corpses.

Was that mountain of death the original form that had created her or was it more like the shell of an egg?

Not even the goddess known as Nephthys knew for sure.

CHAPTER 2

Freeloaders Tend to Grow in Number.

Cannibalization.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru.

Imagine Breaker and World Rejecter.

They saw each other down the dark road and ran along the shortest path toward each other.

The first to swing his arm was Kamisato.

"*Do you wish for a new world*?"

"!?"

They were still five meters apart, so Kamijou should have been out of the other boy's range.

However, he felt a chill race through his entire body. As if flinching from a nearby lightning strike, he lowered his upper body on a baseless reflex.

That thoughtless reaction did not actually dodge anything.

But a moment later, a disturbing explosion sounded directly behind him as if space itself was being torn into and swallowed up.

Thick tension traced along his skin. The impatience felt like a weak electric shock. Mysterious beads of sweat instantly covered his entire forehead.

(Dammit, does he not have to actually touch his opponent!? What conditions does he need and what exactly can he erase? Regardless, his looks way more convenient than mine!!)

But that attack had not been targeting Kamijou.

If it had, it would have blown away his upper body.

(————) He sensed something flinching back behind him, but he did not look back.

Something had been approaching there, but he did not have time to check.

He clenched his right fist again.

He ran toward Kamisato Kakeru to attack his target...which was something else approaching from behind the other boy.

“Ah...ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

It had all been planned out.

As soon as Kamisato’s silhouette casually swung his head to the side, Kamijou’s fist passed by while clenched as hard as a rock. At the same time, it crossed paths with the “something else” that had been attacking the back of Kamisato’s head.

They collided and it was negated.

Imagine Breaker worked perfectly, so whatever was attacking Kamisato must have used a supernatural power. Whether that was magic or an esper power was still a mystery, though.

Kamijou and Kamisato now stood back to back, but they both turned 180 degrees.

“Were you testing me *to see if I would save you or not*?”

“Well, if you hadn’t, all I needed to do was swing my arm.”

Violently bright headlights reached them from a different road once again. The flash briefly dazzled them and burned the scenery into their retinas like a photograph.

That was when they realized two different kinds of violence surrounded them.

One was pitch black. Even from close up, Kamijou could not tell what it was. It looked like an octopus floating in the deep sea, like a soft piece of fat cut away with a knife, or like a loose rubber film being melted from the inside. The more he stared at it, the more its meaning changed and the more confused he became. The surface was covered in ominous bubbles and some things that were not quite eyeballs and not quite suckers blinked with a damp yellow or green light that resembled glow-in-the-dark paint. It almost looked like the colors of a strange poisonous frog or lizard.

The other one was red. It seemed to have the texture of a deep pile carpet soaked with water and left to rot. Something like uneven teeth or tongues could be glimpsed deep in the thick carpet. Kamijou was filled with a sense of caution warning him not to look any deeper.

Neither one seemed to have a solid form and they surrounded the two boys from several meters away.

“At any rate, it looks like *the main task* will have to wait.”

Kamisato Kakeru sounded relatively apathetic.

“Just to be sure, these things aren’t with you, are they?”

“Does it look that way? And if it comes to that, you seem more suspect than me.”

“Or rather...”

“Yes, what are they doing? Have they started cannibalizing each other!?”

The red and black amorphous monsters were acting oddly. With the disturbing sound of sludge flowing into a drain, they began wrapping around and chewing on each other.

Othinus narrowed her eyes from Kamijou’s shoulder.

“This seems to be an accident for them too, but we can’t just watch. In fact, a wounded beast is even more dangerous. They’ll be fighting for their life, so the standard rules don’t apply. Their routine becomes harder to predict and they go all out, so there’s a larger risk of anything nearby getting caught in the middle.”

“What a pain. I wanted to have a nice chat, but it looks like escaping here has to come first.”

“Perhaps so,” spat out Kamijou.

On the one side was something with uneven teeth or tongues deep inside its rotten red carpet and on the other was something with black bubbles that resembled eyeballs or suckers. The two twisted around, sharpened, and split open their own bodies to send out something like sharp claws. Also giant maws lined with countless fangs opened all over them.

“Here they come!!” shouted Othinus.

Countless predatory tools that resembled spears and blades shot from the creatures surrounding them in a donut shape. Kamijou and Kamisato both gathered strength in their right fists to break through the maw of death.

Part 2

Kamijou was entirely absorbed by his activity.

His Imagine Breaker was extraordinarily destructive to supernatural powers, but its effective range was limited to his right hand, which made it weak against multiple simultaneous attacks. St. Germain had given him trouble by taking advantage of that.

He only managed to escape being surrounded here due to Kamisato's help.

He was honestly unsure what would have happened had he been alone.

"Pant, pant! Dammit!!"

He did not know how far he had to run before he could relax, so he just ran and ran. He clicked his tongue when he remembered he had left the supermarket bags behind.

Once he realized the ability to regret something like that meant he was subconsciously beginning to relax, he finally came to a stop.

Not even he was sure where he had ended up.

He was amazed that District 7 had a back alley like this.

He also realized Kamisato was gone.

He had been so focused on escaping that he had not been able to worry about the other's safety.

"What was that? Kamisato, natural enemy of the Magic Gods, was bad enough, but now another problem has shown up. And in a group of two!"

"You sure are kind. Did you not consider the possibility that Kamisato set this up himself? He did seem to be testing what you would do."

"Eh? But he said it wasn't."

"You really are stupid." Othinus pinched his earlobe. "I don't know what exactly World Rejecter does or what conditions are needed to use it, but it defeated Magic Gods by the dozen, didn't it? Would he really run away when faced with just one or two attackers?"

"Then..."

"I'll admit I don't know whether they were working together or not, but he was definitely enjoying it. He was watching how you reacted with a serious look on his face. He was probably playing around and using a different form of communication for what couldn't be said with words."

As he listened to Othinus, Kamijou leaned his sweaty body against a nearby building wall to think.

“What even were those red and black attackers?”

“Who knows.” The eyepatch girl sounded entirely casual. “The red one had the scent of the Dark Continent, but the black one is a complete mystery. It may have been a conflict between magic and science.”

“What’s the Dark Continent? Some ancient civilization that sank into the ocean?”

“It means Africa. Expand your vocabulary.”

Then why couldn’t you just say Africa in the first place!? complained Kamijou in his heart.

“Othinus, you did some science-related stuff in addition to your Norse magic, right?”

“Yes, but that was mostly Bersi.”

“But even you couldn’t figure anything out about the black one?”

“I wouldn’t say that... It’s like it’s on the tip of my tongue, and that’s what makes it so strange. I’m the god that constructed every last part of this ‘original world’. Although that was a lot like watching an infinitely-expanding snow crystal growing from a calculated core, so I didn’t actually design every little thing...”

If asked whether Kamisato Kakeru or the black and red attackers were more powerful, Kamijou probably would have said Kamisato.

But based on what Othinus had just said, it may not have been that simple.

Which meant...

“Oh, no. Did Kamisato manage to get away safely?”

“...Human.”

“I know I’m being naïve, being inconsistent, and getting my priorities backwards, but I won’t be able to sleep tonight if I don’t check. It would be no laughing matter if I was saved while he was captured and devoured.”

“You’re aware how foolish it is, yet you’re still going back!? How am I supposed to control this idiot!?”

Despite Othinus’s fierce protests, Kamijou hesitantly retraced his steps to revisit the scene of the attack. He did not know where he was, but he remembered the different landmarks more than he had expected. Eventually, he found the familiar location.

“Kamisato...isn’t here.”

“At the very least, it doesn’t look like he was eaten as a human sacrifice.”

He heard a rustling sound from the dimly lit road, so he quickly looked down.

“Hm? Hey, it’s my supermarket bags!!”

“Don’t tell me you’re retrieving them. It may be December, but the ice cream will have melted.”

“Othinus, the fact that they’re on the road isn’t what matters. It’s whether they have germs on them or-...”

He trailed off because the heavy bags moved unnaturally.

Then a large cat hopped out.

“Human, the ingredients list has grown while we were gone.”

“Enough with the black jokes, Miss God. And stop right there, stray cat! That’s our precious dinn-...”

He was cut off by further movement.

He heard some mewing from a nearby alleyway and a few kittens approached the large cat. Based on the fur color, they were a family.

This truly cornered Kamijou Touma.

“No fair!! No fair!! This is like seeing a puppy being swept away in the river or a cat separated from its owner by war! I can’t do anything about it now! All I can do is cry!!”

“It’s grabbing the bags and calmly leaving. It probably does this all the time. The damn creature really knows how to live in the city.”

“I know that! But knowing better doesn’t help when it comes to emotion!!”

Kamijou was helpless against this strange barrier.

He was overwhelmed by sorrow and stood stock still for a while.

But if the bags were there, it meant this was definitely where he and Kamisato had clashed. And thus where those red and black creatures and interfered.

The area was poorly lit, but as he stared into the darkness his eyes adjusted to the light and he noticed something else lying on the ground.

“Ugh...”

“That cat is lucky it didn’t try to take this with it too.”

It resembled a rotten red carpet. It had seemed to spread out like an infinite sea when it had attacked, but it had been cruelly torn apart and pieces of it were stuck to the asphalt and concrete walls. The way it continued wriggling even then was disturbing, but that was not the main point.

Kamisato had done this.

His World Rejecter was real.

Just like Kamijou’s Imagine Breaker, it most likely had some idiosyncratic and hard-to-use effect or conditions. After all, it had slaughtered Magic Gods by the dozen. Without something holding it back, the entire world – both science side and magic side – should have been slaughtered already.

But in the right environment, it was this incredibly destructive. Kamisato had claimed “escaping here has to come first”, but if he had been alone, he might have been able to slaughter both of the creatures.

He had been playing around.

Kamijou was unsure how to react to that fact.

He viewed the horrific scene before him once more...and he noticed something.

“Wait a second...”

He had spotted something else amid the remains of the rotten red carpet.

At first, it only looked like a dense object, but a closer looked revealed that a relatively large piece of the rotten carpet was covering something. He began to flip it over, but it reacted to his right hand and vanished, revealing what lay below.

“This is...”

He found an unconscious girl of about twelve.

“This is what that red thing was?”

She had white skin and shoulder-length blonde hair. She wore a white blouse, a short skirt, and black stockings for the chic and luxurious look of a grand piano. She seemed ill-protected against the December chill, but the rotten red carpet may have acted as a coat.

Kamijou had a lot to be surprised about, but the biggest shock was that he recognized her.

As Othinus placed a hand on her forehead and sighed, he muttered the girl's name.

"Bird...way?"

Part 3

Meanwhile, Kamisato Kakeru gave a confused look of his own a short distance away.

He tried to crack his neck in the darkness, but it did not work. He tried a few more times, but he gave up because he felt like he was going to hurt the joint.

Instead, he spoke into his cellphone.

"I can't believe this."

"*You getting caught in the middle of someone else's problems is hardly new. This is sure to be related to a cute girl as always. I bet a naked girl is going to appear from the monster's belly. I'd bet my virginity on it.*"

The voice on the other end had a certain elegance to it. Although Kamisato had no idea if she was using a proper Kyoto dialect or not.

"Don't bet that. Anyway, how long will your analysis take?"

"That depends on how accurate you want it."

Kamisato sounded carefree, but he was surrounded by a horrific scene.

The ground and walls were covered in the remains of the attacker that looked like a deep sea octopus instead of a rotten red carpet. Those remains resembled black clumps of fat or a loose rubber film being melted from the inside.

He heard what sounded like a tabletop fan, but it was actually the spinning of a small motor.

He looked up and saw what appeared to be a toy in the night sky. The device looked like a crane fly made as a craft over summer break and it had a transparent case on its stomach. That case contained a sample of the black substance.

"Taking a peek at Academy City's junk street proved useful. My container lab is doing better than it ever has. It's pretty cool that the kind of electron microscopes we use 'outside' is small enough to fit in your palm here. It was as much of a shock as seeing my first mirrorless camera. Just leave this to your tracer and the earliest results will be in within the hour."

“I see.”

Kamisato pictured the short girl who had glossy black hair that reached the ground, let her baggy lab coat drag behind her, and laughed while covering her mouth with the sleeve.

“But Academy City isn’t as different from the ‘outside’ as I’d heard,” said the girl. “I thought we would be stuck acting like the old lady who can’t figure out how to use the ticket machine.”

“Yeah. At first, I thought there were going to be cars driving through tubes, but it doesn’t seem that different. They even use the normal Japanese yen...or at least something that looks just like it.”

He watched the handmade drone fly away. That girl never went outside and had a bad habit of ordering everything over the internet and picking up anything else with her drone’s manipulator. The indoor girl was an incarnation of the magic that kept certain girls from gaining weight even though they mostly ate pizza and never went outside.

Also, she called herself a tracer.

Her specialty was using the same forensic and crime scene investigation skills as police to pursue and track down an individual from the microscopic trail they left. And the title was not wasted on her.

Even criminal organizations used people like that. Tracking down a target or traitor used to mean gathering witness information or using an information network (mostly made from loan shark client lists), but now they hired hackers to target the Juki Net and online shopping records, analyzed the many photographs and images on the internet in search of the face they wanted, or analyzed samples on the molecular level. These were of course all techniques invented by the police, but technology was just as effective no matter who was using it.

In other words, this girl could track someone down even if they were put into the witness protection program or treated as dead in official records, given cosmetic surgery, had their fingerprint changed, and even had all of their blood swapped out. It was much like hunting down a target in the jungle using the footprints and broken branches on the ground. She had the grim reaper known as data at her fingertips and it could be even more frightening than simple violence.

“Oh, since you had the UAV out, I wanted to have you do a scan to see if I’m being followed.”

“Why?”

“I’m trying to figure out what to do now. I could return to the container house or I could use a different safe house in case I’m being followed. I was hoping for some extra information to make up my mind.”

“Ah ha ha! Come on, this is Academy City. Their technology goes two or three steps further than anything we can even imagine. They say truth is stranger than fiction, but this goes beyond even that. They’re probably tracking you in some really nasty way, so completely losing them would be impossible. Besides, they’re scanning the entire city by satellite.”

“Perhaps.”

“*I’m sure even this phone call is being intercepted. Of course, you knew that but you’re confident you can shake them from your tail by force and escape.*”

“…”

Currently, Kamisato Kakeru – or rather, the Kamisato Faction that had gathered around him – was opposing the Magic Gods. Academy City and the science side had no reason to complain about that. That said, he had entered the city without permission and he had enough power to slaughter Magic Gods by the dozen. The city’s ruler might not choose to ignore him, either because he would be profitable subject for research or because he was a frightening threat.

But what did that matter?

World Rejecter had enough power to deflect that conclusion.

It was the ultimate strike.

It was a truly definitive blow.

“Then I’ll go to the spare safe house and see how things go.”

“That sounds like a good idea. The other girls are going nuts after hearing you contacted the Imagine Breaker without bringing a bodyguard. Especially when you were attacked by some red and black things afterwards. That should scare you a lot more than Academy City or Kamijou Touma. You need to cool your head and think of a good way to placate some girls. Nya ha ha!”

“My head hurts... Anyway, the safe house is at-...”

“'Is that really something to say on a call that’s being intercepted? Don’t worry. I’m a tracer, remember? I’ll track you down even if you don’t tell me a thing. Bye bye☆”

She hung up.

A look of exhaustion briefly came over Kamisato Kakeru and he put his cellphone in his pocket.

Then he looked around the gruesome scene again.

The disturbing black substance was splattered everywhere, but one piece of what looked like bubbling fat was being pushed up by something below. He had no idea what kind of toxins it contained and, in the worst case, it could suddenly attack and began devouring him with its giant maw, but he did not hesitate to approach the creepily pulsating blackness.

“Do you wish for a new world?”

It sounded like some sort of password.

After a light movement of his right hand, the entire clump of black vanished and what slept below was revealed.

She appeared to be between ten and twelve. Her short blonde hair was pushed up with a hairband, leaving her forehead exposed. She wore a down jacket and jogging wear that was as skintight as a wetsuit. There was a slit below the arms, so it likely had temperature regulation for use in any season. The cordless headphones around her neck were most likely linked to the wearable smartwatch on her wrist. Based on her face and the brands of her clothing and accessories, she did not seem to be Japanese.

“Now, then.”

Kamisato Kakeru placed a hand on one hip and sighed.

A girl had indeed appeared from within, but she was not naked. He felt that proved the world could be kind after all. He no longer had to worry about the virginity that the girl on the phone had bet.

(If possible, I want this girl to explain the situation as well. They’d probably claim my own testimony lacked objectivity and refuse to listen.)

In order to get their story straight ahead of time, he wanted to know about her.

He crouched down and checked through her pockets, but he found a card case instead of a wallet.

“A girl of around ten has multiple credit cards? And they’re all black cards?”

The lineup looked like something a casino magnate from Macau would have. She might have been the type who had never seen an actual coin in her life. All of the card companies were from outside Academy City and each card had the same name printed on it.

“Pa...Patri...”

Kamisato traced his finger across it as he read the name aloud.

“Patricia Birdway? Is that it?”

Part 4

"..."

"..."

"..."

The broken window had only been covered by a plastic sheet, so the dorm room was chilly. Pressure bore down on Kamijou Touma as he silently sat on the wooden flooring of that room.

The pressure came from Index, Othinus, and Nephthys.

After eating all the pet food, the calico cat alone was satisfied and it had completely melted while lying on its belly. For some reason, the cute cat was reminiscent of a hopeless old man after having far too much to drink. The pet was sleeping so defenselessly that there was no hope of it making a gallant entry to rescue its owner.

The discussion was focused on a single issue.

"Touma, what are we going to do about dinner?"

"No, not that!! I know I shouldn't be restarting this argument, but isn't there something more important here!? Besides, whose fault do you think it is there's only miso and soy sauce in the fridge!?"

"Personally, I don't see why you would even keep soy sauce in the fridge," added Nephthys. "The Japanese put dashi and soy sauce in everything, so don't you go through the bottles pretty fast? Do you even have to worry about oxidation?"

"Huh? No one else cares? We're really focusing on this? O-okay, then!! You're wrong! Soy sauce goes on hiyayakko too, so it tastes better when it's chilled!! What kind of idiot would go to the trouble of chilling tofu and then adding room temperature soy sauce!? It makes no sense!!"

"More importantly, this girl."

Othinus alone was taking things seriously.

Kamijou was on all fours and pounding at the floor in frustration, but the eyepatch girl ignored him and kept the conversation going.

"That idiot picked up another one. There were two attackers, a red one and a black one, and this is apparently one of them. It's his usual sickness that makes him save anything

he can call a 'girl'. And that means we have a problem beyond Kamisato Kakeru. So what should we do?"

"Hmm."

Index cutely vocalized her thinking.

They had a grimoire library with 103,000 grimoires memorized and two legit Magic Gods. If this had anything to do with magic, there would be no hiding it.

They poked at the fragments of the rotten red carpet reluctantly clinging to Birdway's clothes as she lay on the floor.

"Nya-Nya Bulembu. That African Cinderella story had something like this. It's the story of a princess forced to wear an ugly animal skin. Everyone found her repulsive because of it, but it actually kept the men from attacking her and a beautiful princess filled with a mystical power was raised within the skin."

Kamijou quickly grew fed up with it.

"That sounds more like the Ugly Duckling than Cinderella. And it straight-up attacked us instead of acting as camouflage. Is that supposed to be how it keeps men from attacking her? What would make it take such a sharp turn towards offense!?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

That should have been a perfectly natural question, but all three girls(?) glared quite intensely at him. There was even a hint of scorn mixed in like they were looking at a dung beetle.

The small Othinus sighed.

"But its main focus was raising the princess inside it, not keeping the men away. And wasn't it supposed to be green and covered in moss?"

"There might be something else," said Index as she moved her fingers a short distance above Birdway's slender form. "Based on the symbols...there's more to this. Other African myths and legends have been broken down and implanted."

"Why Africa?" bluntly asked Kamijou. "I don't know all that much about magic, but isn't Birdway from Europe? Doesn't she specialize in Western magic that uses the alphabet?"

"Hmm, I see."

Bandaged Nephthys seemed to have recovered a fair bit since she had first shown up, so she gave a bewitching smile while still sitting on the floor.

“This might be the usual pattern for Europeans.”

“What?”

“It happens a lot.” Othinus sounded annoyed. “‘Modern Western Magic’ sounds like it’s European magic put together by Europeans using European cultures, but that isn’t quite accurate.”

“It isn’t?”

Hadn’t Agnese once said that Western magic was essentially made up of tricks using Christianity and the cheating magicians made the serious worshippers look like fools? Hadn’t she said that was why she could not allow them to use magic?

However, this was how the Magic Gods saw things.

“They try really hard for a while. Yes, for a while.”

“But in the end, they realize there are wishes that they can’t grant with their own rules. So what are those Europeans to do? The answer is simple. They begin innocently believing that the equation lies hidden in some as yet unseen paradise.”

“Of course, it’s usually nonsense like trying to find some strange grand master in distant Tibet and gaining the key to the gates of heaven through his teachings. Sometimes they even mention Atlantis, Mu, or some other continent that sank long ago. Oh, right. I think there’s even one about receiving the knowledge and wisdom of god from the radio signals sent by the sun.”

Othinus laughed as she explained.

As those who really did know the greatest secrets of the magic world, humans who thought they could pray to god and unconditionally receive knowledge may have seemed hopelessly shallow. There may indeed have been some secret Tibetan techniques in Tibet, but they would not be the convenient vending machine of knowledge that Europeans imagined them to be.

“One example was influenced by the introduction of foreign cultures during the colonial period. That includes Central and South America, the Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, and India, but the biggest influence of all came from the Dark Continent aka Africa. After all, it’s a large place with tons of different tribes, so it’s overflowing with countless legends. It’s a true melting pot. And from a European point of view, it’s right across the Mediterranean and thus requires much less preparation than South America or India. This thinking worked its way deep into even the Golden Dawn which was called the world’s largest magic cabal.”

“One of the biggest names alongside Yeats and Mathers was Crowley. The tarot he used was known as Thoth Tarot which used the name of an Egyptian god. And when explaining his ideology, he refers to the Aeons of Isis, Osiris, and Horus,” easily explained chocolate-colored Nephthys. “The standard Golden-style tarot told the story of the Son of God from his birth to his execution and his resurrection in order to draw on a portion of his power. The twenty-two cards of the Major Arcana from The Fool to The World are synchronized with the twenty-two paths connecting the Sephirot tree, so they are meant to acquire a technique of entering the realm of god with a human body. In other words, they’re all miracles that can be explained through Christianity.”

“But Thoth Tarot is a little different even though it’s based on the same tree.”

“It has a special sequence that starts at the birth of Christianity and follows it to its destruction – that is, the coming of Armageddon – and then to the ‘new Aeon’ that will arrive afterwards. The meaning of the Hanged Man is quite different and Judgment is replaced with The Aeon. In other words, you are not arriving at the realm of god, you are destroying the ‘closed ceiling’ that is god’s territory and then bringing humanity to the next stage above that. Of course, that probably seems dreadfully arrogant from the Vatican’s point of view.”

“…”

Index, who was (technically) an Anglican nun, looked like she was unsure what to say.

Nephthys seductively adjusted her legs and continued her lecture.

“Now according to Crowley, the Aeon of Isis is the time of primitive religions before the establishment of Christianity, the Aeon of Osiris is the time of stagnation while Christianity spreads, and the Aeon of Horus is the time when mankind achieves a true awakening through the destruction of Christianity. However, that was a rather extreme view even among the Golden cabal, so apparently not everyone in the cabal supported it.”

“So what does that mean?” Kamijou skipped the difficult parts and gave just his conclusion. “The European magicians try to work within their own culture for a while, but when they hit a dead end, they have a bad habit of changing their way of thinking and digging through information from around the world to resolve whatever contradiction they’re faced with?”

He vaguely pictured it as something like putting caviar or foie gras on top of a bowl of rice and claiming it was a new Japanese dish.

“And they even forget they asked for help afterwards. But that might just come naturally to the people who insist they were the ones to invent gunpowder and noodles. It makes me wonder if they ever get confused why it’s so difficult to eat food shaped that way by wrapping it around a fork instead of just slurping it up.”

“In that case...”

Kamijou looked back down at Birdway as she slept on the floor.

(That arrogant girl had incredible magic and a large organization at her disposal, but she still came across something that she didn't think she could deal with?)

He shuddered all the more.

This no longer looked like a trivial interruption in the Kamisato Kakeru issue. The further they dug into this, the heavier it seemed to get.

"What exactly is it?"

He knew he was digressing from the main task that was Kamisato, but he still asked the question.

"What is Birdway dealing with?"

"Well..."

Index moved her fingers through the empty space slightly above Birdway's sleeping body.

"Wheat...no, is this corn? Africa is pretty big and filled with different tribes, cultures, and legends, but this looks like bits and pieces were gathered from all over. Instead of a single system of mythology, it's more like she was gathering legends to fill in what she was missing."

"Meaning?"

"...Doll...fruit...ceremony abbreviation and cost reduction...sacrifice and destruction using a mechanical series of steps...an offering to a god...no, more like healing a sick patient by providing a corresponding part...the theory of predation..."

Index's fingers came to a stop.

They were pointed right at the center of Birdway's chest as the silver-haired nun said more.

"*Cannibalization?*"

But that was as far as she got.

Something grabbed her wrist as if to prevent her fingers from revealing more of the truth.

"Don't touch me."

It was Leivinia Birdway.

She did not get up and her face remained pale, but the corners of her lips still curved upward.

“An investigation isn’t needed to know that I *have more* than you.”

“…”

At first, Index was confused.

Next, she realized her fingers were pointing at the center of Birdway’s flat chest.

Finally, she looked down at her own habit-covered chest.

“You’re lying!! That has to be a lie!!”

“Give up. The system of this world is a cruel one.”

“I don’t want to hear that from a child who wouldn’t even know how to put on a bra!!”

“Whaaat!? What do bras have to do with anything!? Besides, the idea that having breasts and wearing a bra are one and the same is nothing but a fantasy of those with no cup size to speak of!!”

Nephthys sighed at the fruitless conflict.

For the record, the brown beauty was not wearing a bra yet she clearly did have a cup size to speak of.

The world was a confusing place.

Part 5

First of all, the girl sent out the UAV that looked like a toy and like a crane fly.

After confirming the area was safe, she approached the building in her formal clothing and her baggy lab coat that dragged behind her. With her glossy black hair reaching her ankles and her large sleeves covering even her hands, the outfit was somewhat reminiscent of a ceremonial kimono.

However, she was lacking in the size needed to be called a charming beauty.

“Naitou, Joujima, Ganzan, Tsukuyomi...oh, here we go.”

The solid sound of leather shoes on the floor continued as she walked down the corridor of the rundown District 7 apartment building while checking the nameplates. When she reached one with a blank nameplate suggesting the resident had only just moved in, she violently knocked instead of ringing the bell.

Without waiting for an answer, she applied a few reagents to the keyhole and used some wires to unlock the door in less than ten seconds. She opened the door to find a hellish scene contained within a 4.5 tatami mat room without a bathroom.

“Grrrr!! Hiss hiss!!”

“Ow!! Ow ow ow ow ow ow!! Why is this girl acting like a wounded cat the second she wakes up!?”

In one corner, a blonde girl with her forehead showing had all her hair bristled as she scratched at the normal high school boy, Kamisato Kakeru. The window was broken and covered by a plastic sheet, but that was most likely unrelated to this.

The lab coat girl covered her mouth with a baggy sleeve and spoke with a faint smile in her voice.

“Come now. She woke up to find herself in an unfamiliar boy’s apartment. You’re clearly the one at fault here.”

“No good deed goes unpunished in this age of mistrust, huh!?”

“Now, now, young lady.”

The lab coat girl crouched down to get on eye level with Patricia Birdway whose caution was set to max and who had tears of anger in her eyes. The lab coat girl smiled while elegantly keeping her teeth hidden.

Then she dropped a tremendous bomb.

“I may not look it, but I specialize in unofficial forensic investigation. If you don’t trust Kamisato-han and you’re worried about your body, I can check to see if you’re pregnant. If you just squeeze your eyes shut and spread your legs, it’ll be over in no time.”

“!?”

Patricia’s entire body shook.

The lab coat girl was still smiling. In fact, the perfect smile was frozen on her face. She was not joking or being unreasonable. She was being intentionally cruel to this girl who had harmed Kamisato, no matter how legitimate her reasons might have been.

The boy sighed, placed a hand on his neck, and swung his head a little to the side. He was trying to crack the joint, but it was not working.

“Ellen.”

“Yes, yes, hi, yes, hi! I’ll leave my harassment at that. Honestly, if Claire and Elza learned how ungrateful she was being, they would seriously tear her to pieces, you know? You ran off without your bodyguards and now you’re injured. What do you think is going to happen now, boss?”

“Oh, no... Maybe I should hide the injuries.”

“Well, it’s just a few welts from some scratches and she didn’t draw any blood. A thick application of foundation should be enough.”

That was when a strange aura of fear came from Patricia’s entire body while she trembled in the corner of the room. A sharp crack seemed to run through her soft cheek and something like an octopus tentacle filled with bubbling eyeballs or suckers showed itself. There were also glimpses of the colors of a strange poisonous frog or lizard.

It bent, twisted, and formed a single sharp spear before shooting out like a bullet.

Its target was Ellen. It shot a bit below her evenly-cut bangs – that is, the center of her face.

However...

“Oops.”

Kamisato reached his hand casually out from the side.

As soon as he grabbed it, a large chunk was torn from the spear and the bubbling mass frantically retreated back into Patricia’s body.

An unpleasant sound followed.

It came from below the small girl’s skin. Something as thick as a thumb seemed to slither from her cheek and down toward the neck holding her headphones.

The baggy lab coat girl reflexively tried to say something, but Kamisato Kakeru placed his index finger over her lips, then smiled toward Patricia in the corner.

“That...didn’t seem to be under your control.”

“...”

Patricia remained silent and a change came over her chest.

A pulsation was evident even through her puffy down jacket.

However, it clearly did not come from a human heart. Something else was wriggling at the center of her chest.

“To be honest, you’re free to tell us what’s going on or not. But if you don’t tell us, we’ll investigate it on our own. We will find the truth, but you can’t choose the extent of that truth.”

As Kamisato spoke, the pulsation grew smaller.

Or rather, it was hiding.

What had been gathered in one spot scattered in every direction to disperse and hide inside her body. Normally, she would not seem any different from a normal person.

“So you have the advantage here. If you tell us, you can choose the extent of the truth you want us to know.”

Patricia thought, opened her mouth, said nothing, hung her head, and shook her head.

Then she lifted her head once more.

“Sorry.”

“My response depends on what you’re apologizing for.”

Was it for injuring Kamisato and trying to harm the lab coat girl?

Or was it for brushing off his suggestion and rejecting his explanation?

But the girl had been apologizing for something else entirely.

“For my weak heart that’s telling me it will be crushed by the anxiety if I don’t tell you, even though I know telling you will drag you into this.”

Kamisato smiled and responded.

“Then you don’t need to apologize.”

“Not even I know what this is. As a guest researcher from the university, I took part in a study of the largescale changes in the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean currents due to the changes in ice levels at the poles. While we were investigating the South Pole, we found a new kind of parasite. Our team called it Sample Shoggoth.”

“Shoggoth, hm?” Kamisato exhaled slowly. “I’d like to hear how you got from Antarctica to Academy City.”

“O-okay. It might not be all that important, though. While visiting different medical institutions to find a way to deal with this, I eventually found myself in Academy City. That’s all.”

“If you were undergoing treatment, why were you walking around outside?”

“While it’s a parasite, it doesn’t spread indiscriminately or anything. Oh, but I can’t guarantee it won’t cause you any problems.”

“Yes, it did just attack me.”

“Ellen.”

“I’m a victim!!”

The upset lab coat girl brought a finger to her lips again and Kamisato prompted Patricia to continue.

“Apparently, even Academy City’s technology has little chance of safely removing it. However, that’s not what I’m worried about. The problem is my sister.”

“Your sister?”

Kamisato placed a hand on his neck as he asked and Patricia nodded.

“The red one.”

That short answer held significant meaning.

“My sister seems to be searching for a way to save me with her own methods, but I can’t rely on that. I can never accept that method, so I can’t just sit around and wait. I need to stop her and have her give up on that method immediately.”

“Why?”

He did not understand, so he simply asked about it.

“It might not work, but just like with the lottery, having as many options as possible raises the odds of a miracle happening, right? Although if you’re talking about having an amateur cut you open with a rusty scalpel and no anesthetic, then yeah, you should probably say no to that.”

“If only that was what it was.”

Patricia shook her head and Kamisato’s frown deepened.

“It’s something worse?”

“If she does use her method, there’s no guarantee it will save me from this. That’s a complete unknown.”

Patricia admitted that first.

And then she cut to the heart of the matter.

“But if she uses that method, there’s a risk of her dying. She knows that and is still offering herself up to me, but that’s exactly why I have to reject it.”

Part 6

Birdway sat up and looked around the room.

“The window is broken here too? That would explain why it’s so cold.”

“The entire city’s like this thanks to the High Priest. At least be thankful there’s a plastic sheet covering it.”

“And why is the kotatsu over there? Isn’t that my seat?”

“It isn’t anyone’s seat. We just felt like using it today is all. ...Hey, quite forcing your way in here! There isn’t enough room!!”

“You’re the one that stole my seat.”

She was pouting her lips for some reason, so she may have been picky about her position, just like a cat.

“Fine, I’ll explain everything from the beginning.”

After sitting right next to Kamijou, Birdway finally got down to business.

Her face looked pale, but having the others worry over her seemed to hurt her pride. She blocked Kamijou’s hand when he tried to support her back.

“But first, promise me something, Kamijou Touma. Do not touch me. There shouldn’t be an issue since you claim to have carried me here, but I want to be as cautious as I can. I don’t want one casual move from you ruining everything.”

“What?”

“I’m telling you not to touch my chest.”

“Quick question, Birdway. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“You have to ask? I’m only so afraid *because* it’s you!!”

She looked at him like he was a wild animal, which depressed him a fair bit.

“Let me be blunt, this is a personal issue. It’s nothing for you all to get involved in and you don’t need to worry about it affecting the entire world. Just to be clear, this is about my life.”

“And I still want to know even after hearing that. Besides, you already said you would explain everything from the beginning.”

“Tch.”

She clicked her tongue before continuing.

“It’s about my sister.”

“Umm?”

“Patricia Birdway. Oh, right. I guess you wouldn’t be familiar with her. She was only involved in a fight between Anglican magicians *that took place behind the scenes of an incident you and I dealt with together*.”

She looked up to the ceiling as if thinking back to the past.

She may have been sorting between what she knew and what Kamijou most likely knew.

“She uses the Birdway name, but she is not a magician. While I have been exclusively focused on magic, she has a more scientific way of thinking. She is my little sister, which should give you a guess at her age, but she already has a PhD and works on university-run projects. She has also been sponsored by Academy City or its cooperative institutions to join labs and research ships as a guest researcher. She has more than twenty published papers and the media reacts entirely differently when a paper is announced with her name on it, so plenty of schools are looking for a chance to bring her in. To sum it up, she’s my wonderful little sister. I can only say this while she isn’t here, but she’s one of the few people I don’t mind having around.”

“Why am I picturing two sadistic little girls glaring down at me with identical smirks?”

“Her personality is the polar opposite of mine.”

“Wow, she must be an angel!! I’d actually be a little afraid to meet someone that perfect!!”

“I don’t like what you’re implying there.” Birdway sounded a little upset. “Of course, Patricia knows nothing of the cabal. To be exact, I’ve made sure of it. And her success isn’t

because we've been putting in a good word for her. She knows I lead some kind of organization related to the Birdway family, but she isn't actually aware that it's a magic cabal. She probably thinks it's a salon that dates back to the old noble days or something. It's only just barely, but she still qualifies as a normal person."

"What about it? What does that have to do with you wandering around Academy City as some kind of animal skin monster?"

"Animal sk-... Whatever. There was someone else there besides me, wasn't there?"

"You mean Kamisato?"

"Kamisato?"

Birdway sounded confused, so that must not have been the answer.

"You mean the black one, don't you?" cut in Othinus.

"Wait... You mean there was a human inside that one too!?"

"That's the problem." Birdway sighed. "That was my sister Patricia. But needless to say, she wasn't born like that. There was apparently some trouble on an Antarctic investigation. Some weird parasite got inside her and transformed her into that."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite serious. I initially balled up the report and threw it at Mark's head, but once I started taking it seriously, I realized how bad this is. I checked through each of the cards the cabal holds and eventually took a step into the realm of the Dark Continent. You understand what that means, don't you? Even with my organization, there was nothing I could do."

If someone claimed a fleet of UFOs was going to attack tomorrow, everyone would laugh it off.

But how was everyone supposed to react once readings actually filled the radars and the many shapes were spotted on the photos taken with telescopes?

The moment when the ridiculous became no laughing matter was when everything one knew crumbled away.

"Academy City was apparently backing the project, so she was first sent to 'outside' cooperative institutions and then to an Academy City medical facility. But you can see the results.

She escaped the bed she was restrained to and is on a rampage outside. Even the science side sees little chance of healing that illness."

“So that means you’re trying to...?”

“Heal her using magic. Do you get a little of what’s going on now?”

He did a little, but the full outline of the situation had not quite come into focus.

“However, this is no easy task. That grimoire library will probably have revealed most of it already, but this cannibalization is a hybrid from the Dark Continent. As the leader of a Golden organization, I don’t want the men who rely on me seeing me like this. And when it has to do with something even more important than my own life, my reputation is at stake. Well, to be technical, the Dawn-Colored Sunlight isn’t a pure Golden cabal and *it isn’t even a magic cabal in the truest sense of the term*...but that means it isn’t as powerful as it once was and sometimes has issues at the extremities of the organization. At any rate, I didn’t want to spread unnecessary confusion during this difficult time, so I had no choice but to act alone.”

“Talking to an average high school boy about leading an organization isn’t going to help much. Sorry, but I’ve never even had a part-time job.”

“...You’re not the most considerate person, are you?”

“Anyway, what is that black thing? You said something about the Antarctic and a parasite, but does it spread from person to person?”

“I don’t know, but if it was highly contagious, I doubt Academy City would bring it inside the city...or at least I sincerely hope they wouldn’t. It apparently won’t leave my sister’s body now that she’s its host. Of course, it might seek out a new host if her vitals grew unstable.”

“Sounds more like a hairworm than influenza.”

“I don’t like the sound of either comparison,” spat out Birdway. “That thing has dissolved all of the fat in Patricia’s body and slips inside the empty space to maintain her human silhouette. It also handles the storage and distribution of nutrients that the fat would have. In other words, that thing holds my sister’s life in its hands. Try to extract it and it will go nuts and tear her body to shreds. And even if you did successfully suck it out, all that would remain is an empty skin-and-bones shell of my sister. She would die before she could recover her strength. In other words, she can’t be saved by normal means.”

“...That’s awful.”

“That’s just how parasites work. They latch onto their host and won’t let go. That thing is probably doing its best to survive in its own way. Anyway, everything I told you was in Mark’s report, but he couldn’t come up with an actual solution. That’s why I left the organization to act on my own.”

That meant Birdway had snuck into Academy City to do something about Patricia who could not be saved with surgery.

She had even left her subordinates and cast aside the Western magic she excelled at.

“Then what is your trump card?”

“My body. That’s why I told you not to touch me with Imagine Breaker.”

Birdway lightly tapped the center of her flat chest.

“This animal skin is based on the African legend of a princess. It’s a medium that fosters growth while providing defense and concealment so the beautiful princess could grow up without anyone getting in her way. I’ve been using it to grow a certain something.”

Birdway was of course not just wearing the animal skin for her health and beauty.

But then what was it for?

“That girl mentioned cannibalization, didn’t she?” A note of resignation entered Birdway’s voice. “A certain concept occasionally shows up in legends concerning food. If your eye is sick, eat an eye. If your arms or legs are lame, eat an arm or a leg. If your heart is bad, eat a heart. That way, you will regain a healthy body. Of course, another mammal like a pig or cow is often used, but it sometimes means eating body parts of another human.”

“Wait...you don’t mean...”

“I needed a way to save my sister.”

As she spoke, Birdway removed her large brooch and unbuttoned her blouse.

She was not wearing a bra, but a thin slip hung from shoulder straps and covered her from the chest to below the navel.

But that was not what caught Kamijou’s attention.

In addition to the two lovely mounds, there was something grotesque growing near the center of her flat chest.

It pulsated like a living creature, but it was clearly entirely separate from Birdway’s own pulse.

“I told you I *have more* than you, didn’t I?” Birdway gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I have created a new organ in my body that is meant to be eaten. If Patricia eats this once it’s fully grown, this will all be over.”

Part 7

In the rundown apartment, Patricia placed a hand over the center of her chest.

The foreign object there was obvious even over her puffy down jacket.

The thing must have realized she was feeling for it because it changed shape to slip below her skin. It split apart and the protruding bump vanished. It was like a diving submarine or like an octopus monster shifting its volume from its fist-sized main body to its eight legs.

That was when the nearly broken doorbell rang.

Kamisato and Ellen seemed carefree.

“I wonder who that is.”

“Hard to tell when *only* knowing it’s one of your fans still leaves about one hundred different options. You should probably make a list of all the girl’s you’ve won. I could combine that with facial recognition software to make a Kamisato App that automatically gives you their name and profile.”

It sounded like a joke, but Kamisato only sighed.

Meanwhile, the front door opened from the outside and two girls walked in.

They were Elza and Claire.

They both belonged to the unofficial “Kamisato Faction”.

Elza had long brown hair that was wildly cut away and she had the overall atmosphere of a delinquent. Due to the way her hair was cut, she almost seemed to have fox ears on the sides of her head. She wore a white sweater and a red pleated skirt, but the skirt was extremely long, which made her look like an old school delinquent or a shrine maiden. The girl’s image hit both extremes and she held a large plastic bottle in her hands. The clear container had its label removed and it contained old discolored ten yen coins instead of a liquid. She also had a baby carrier attached by a belt which pushed up and accentuated her already large breasts, but their size apparently bothered her and she would get mad if someone mentioned it.

Claire wore thick glasses and had long black hair tied back. She wore a white apron-like dress that left her back bare and she was an obedient gardening club girl...or she should have been. She looked plain and inconspicuous, but that impression was entirely overturned by the giant tropical flowers blooming on either side of her head. It almost looked like her twintails had exploded. Even more colorful flower petals adorned her back.

As soon as the two opened the thin door without knocking, they looked around and started speaking.

“Hm, so is this our new hideout? This is awful. The previous clubroom we’d occupied was filled with plenty of convenient items. I doubt there’s a computer and microwave in here.”

“But Elza, you don’t see a 4.5 tatami room every day, so isn’t it kind of exciting? Like a poor but happy couple pressing their shoulders together for warmth and reconfirming their love for each other. Kyah☆”

“C’mon, Claire, that’s probably the same kind of excitement you get from a Columbian prison tour or a Thai military torture tour. You’re paying money to enjoy a lack of freedom.”

“Please don’t say that! The visuals of collars, handcuffs, and creaking ropes hanging from hooks are encroaching on my Showa song paradise!!”

“You’ve got a surprisingly detailed imagination. I bet this teacher’s pet is secretly quite the perv-...”

“Ei☆”

After the glasses girl gathered strength in her stocking-covered legs and hips to deliver a punch to the delinquent girl’s side, one of the girls doubled over. Even through the sweater, her large breasts jiggled a needless amount.

Claire ignored her choking companion and turned toward Kamisato.

“You told us a little over the phone, but what exactly is going on here?”

Patricia noticeably put her guard up in the corner of the room and short Ellen only shrugged while dragging her baggy lab coat behind her like a ceremonial kimono, so Kamisato had no choice but to answer.

He placed a hand on the side of his neck and shook his head to the side a little, but the joint would not crack.

“Try to contain your surprise when you hear this.”

“Sure, sure.”

“I was just being threatened a little bit. *She said she has some horrible secret and I’ll get dragged into some awful incident if I get any more involved*.”

“Ohh...”

“Ohh...”

The glasses and delinquent girls both rubbed their index finger against their temple and spoke up in harmony.

Ellen then chimed in with her ankle-length black hair swaying behind her.

“In other words, the setup is complete.”

“Y’know, did she really think a hot-blooded boy was going to back off when he heard that? Are you sure she isn’t sitting there waiting for the boss to jump at the opportunity?”

“She only draws Kamisato-san in because she isn’t aware what she’s doing. You know, *just like always*.”

There seemed to be some hidden meaning to that, but...

“Yeah, it was especially bad with you, Claire. You were outside and in public, but you were still nude when you turned that corner and ran right into the boss. Talk about cheating. Thinking back, you really were the queen of cheating.”

“I-I don’t want to hear that from you! Who meets a guy by suddenly falling from the sky in this day and age!? What dimension did you even come from!? And not only did you manage to land right on top of Kamisato-san’s face, but what happened to your panties!? Did you leave them in that other dimension!?”

“I did have something on! It was a large band-aid though!!”

“Come now. You need to thank Ellen-chan here for using my unofficial forensic investigation skills to solve that earthshattering incident. I bet that bastard never imagined those initial missing panties would end up being the key to ending it all. Nice job, me. And Kamisato-han was of course a real hero.”

They had moved their conversation along and left him behind, so Kamisato Kakeru lightly scratched at his head and tried making a rebuttal.

“I’m not doing any of this because I want to.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“Don’t be silly.”

It took them less than half a second.

He himself was apparently not the one who decided who “Kamisato Kakeru” was.

Ellen waved her baggy lab coat sleeve as she said more.

“This might stray somewhat from the main task, but we all know Kamisato-han can’t ignore it. Even if we decided to ignore it, he’d run off to the other side of the world to save her on his own if he had to. So it would be best if we helped him out so he can finish it as quickly as possible and get back to the main task. Is that okay with you?”

“Sure is,” said Elza.

“I don’t mind,” agreed Claire. “Instead of attaching a bell to a cat’s collar and letting it wander around, we’re holding the dog’s leash and taking a walk with it, right? I’d feel more comfortable that way and I personally prefer it.”

“That taste. You really are a special kind of perv-...”

“Ei!! Ei ei!!”

The violent rush from the teacher’s pet silenced Elza’s diaphragm.

However, Kamisato was not the only one who had been left behind. As the older girls’ conversation continued without her, Patricia’s hands nervously wandered through the air.

Kamisato lightly shrugged as he too had been abandoned.

“Don’t worry about it. They’re always like this.”

“Eh? Oh.”

Patricia tried to say something, but the others cut in first.

“The weirdest one of us all is trying to act normal.”

“And he has guts hitting on a girl right in front of us! Honestly, could this *be* following the standard script any closer!?”

“This is how Kamisato Kakeru gathered one hundred girls to construct his personal empire. Now, we need to organize things, so let’s make a list of what we need to do and sort it by priority.”

Ellen clapped her hands to gather attention.

The girl named Patricia had some sort of large problem and a few steps were needed to solve it. Kamisato Kakeru began thinking about the aspects of these girls that were just as unique as his own right hand, but...

“First, we need to take a bath, but this rundown apartment has a shared bathroom and no bath. I wonder how the other residents get by.”

It came so suddenly. Ellen's thought seemed to fly in from the farthest reaches of the universe.

However, this was apparently not simply a case of her being out of her mind.

"Yeah, I asked around and there's apparently a bathhouse around here that they usually use. That's what this *tiny teacher* told me."

"A bathhouse! Oh, that has a wonderfully retro ring to it!! It has so much more charm than some dull Western term like 'hot spa'!! And it's one of the checkpoints any couple in love simply has to try out at least once! Pant, pant. Huh? Why is everything getting so blurry? Pant, pant!!"

"Quit going into full bloom, you pervert. You're steaming up your glasses with a self-powered thermal power plant."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," cut in Kamisato.

He could not believe that no one was opposing the idea. That meant he had to do it himself.

And he still could not crack his neck.

"Why are we about to go take a bath all of a sudden?"

"Come now. Because we're preparing for battle, of course."

Ellen looked entirely nonchalant as she answered, so Kamisato covered his face with a hand. He could not tell how these girls' minds were reaching this conclusion.

"Is this what I think it is? Is it some kind of code that seems entirely incomprehensible if you don't have the kind of mind that can view the world exclusively in terms of 'amazing', 'awesome', and 'cute'?"

"What's got you so quiet, boss?" asked Elza. "We ran right on over here as soon as we got inside Academy City. We weren't hanging around setting up a hideout like you. Plus, we're approaching the limits of what deodorant can accomplish. It's like sports practice after PE. Listen, if we begin a new sweaty battle without a shower, it's going to damage our pride as girls, which is more important than the world itself!!"

They forced their opinion on him.

They got by on momentum alone.

That was generally how Kamisato Kakeru's everyday life went.

He shook his head in exasperation and started to join the girls, but something else stopped him. Yes, they had Patricia, an outsider, with them. She seemed unwilling to have Kamisato Kakeru, the final normal person, leave her.

“Wh-why are you all talking about taking a bath all of a sudden!? I don’t want to take one. This really isn’t the time for that!!”

“Ohhhh, right. Foreigners don’t have a bath culture like us. I hear a lot of them feel pretty turned off by the idea of an open-air hot spring.”

“...I really don’t think that’s the problem here.”

Kamisato gave a mild retort.

Patricia was clearly in the right on this one. She had been thrown into an entire group of strangers and, not ten minutes after meeting them, she was being asked to go take a bath with them. That thought process was completely broken.

Or it should have been.

Once again, it came down to the thought processes of a girl that a “normal high school boy” like Kamisato Kakeru found so incomprehensible.

“Well, we won’t force you to do anything.”

“But with your best interests in mind, I have to ask if you’re sure you want that. From what I’ve heard, some kind of goopy black octopus came out of you. This isn’t really an issue of individual taste. I’m just amazed you would show your face in front of a boy after that. And while I don’t know what that goopy thing was, what if it starts to smell after a while? Can you put up with that? Are you sure you want *a boy to find out* that kind of stuff comes from a girl’s body or that a girl is that kind of creature? If you say you don’t mind, then you can curl up in the corner and stay here, but I’d be about ready to bite my tongue at that point. And not just because it’s the boss I’m talking about. Isn’t it normally all over as soon as the general category of ‘boys’ finds out?”

“Wha-?”

In her jogging wear and down jacket, Patricia’s face blushed and then grew pale. Claire, the gardening club member in glasses, casually cut in. Because she was messing with the flowers on her head, her breasts were visible through the sides of her white dress.

“If that’s just the type of girl she is, then what does it matter? I know we’re not one to talk, but Kamisato-san is surrounded by girls and they all want to show off with something that no one else has. ...Maybe she’s trying to be the smell-fetish girl. H-hm... Going that route certainly would be a courageous decision.”

“You’re really picking up on the worst side of Japanese culture to look at it like that. You truly are a hopeless perv-...”

“Ei!!!!!”

With a solid sound, Elza was silenced (as her breasts jiggled), but Patricia had bigger things to worry about.

She did not want them to force that identity on her.

“N-no!! Don’t place me on those weird rails!!”

She desperately protested, but it was not enough to stop forensic lab coat girl Ellen.

“But if you keep this up, you’ll be there whether you like it or not. We’ll all be washing away our sweat in the bath while you’re here all alone and stinky. Oh, but Kamisato-han is nice, so he won’t let it show if it bothers him. He might even take pity on you and be extra nice. See, it doesn’t matter what you want. You have no say. It isn’t up to you. You’ll be placed on those rails Elza and Claire mentioned regardless. Do you understand now?”

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-why do I have to follow that kind of-...”

“But wouldn’t it be painful? Come now. I don’t know your exact age...”

Ellen gave a cruel smile and spoke her next words like she was stabbing a knife into the girl.

“*But people look down on someone who can’t take a bath on their own by your age.*”

Kamisato very nearly voiced his surprise.

He had a vivid vision of an invisible lever being thrown.

Blonde forehead girl Patricia shouted back on reflex.

“I can take a bath on my own!! A Japanese bathhouse isn’t a problem! D-don’t mock me like that!!!!”

Patricia pressed a fist against the center of the down jacket covering her flat chest.

That represented the disturbing pulsation that had been there not long before.

It had dived down through her entire body, but it would gather back in one spot and surface like an eight-legged monster from the dark sea.

Elza had not heard the details of the situation, but she seemed to have good instincts for this kind of thing.

“Is something the matter?”

“Eh? No, nothing. It...it doesn’t appear when I’m just sitting around...”

The delinquent girl with roughly cut hair scratched her head at Patricia’s hesitant answer.

She seemed to be a caring person because she pointed her thumb at Claire next to her.

“I don’t know what your problem is, but the world is a big place. You can even find *glasses girls with tropical flowers growing from their heads* smiling in the shopping district like it’s nothing. You’re free to believe whatever you want, even if that leads to some kind of complex, but try thinking through it again. Is that obstacle really insurmountable? And what would be the perfect time to overcome it?”

“Elza, you seem to think you’re being helpful, but can we speak out back later? And I don’t think a psychedelic girl *who always carries around a bottle of coins like it’s her baby* has any right to talk about what’s normal.”

“Oh? What’s that, Claire? Do you want me to bring out the herbicide or the lawnmower?”

The conversation jumped from place to place, moving the eye of the storm in the process. Patricia had been left behind once again, but that casual treatment may have been proof she was not being too much trouble.

At any rate, they all left the rundown apartment.

Kamisato had entered the city before the others, so he knew where the bathhouse was. He briefly considered intentionally taking a wrong turn to make a large circle back to the rundown apartment, but he could tell this was something of a life-or-death issue for Claire and Elza and he knew he would probably end up beaten to a pulp if he tried that. Obediently doing as asked seemed the best course of action.

As they walked along the nighttime street, he placed a hand on the side of his neck.

He was apparently trying to crack the joint, but it did not seem to be working.

When he noticed Patricia giving him a puzzled look, he smiled and explained.

“It has no real meaning.”

His voice sounded kind yet somehow hollow.

“I wanted some kind of continual obsession. It could have been spinning a pen, whistling, or anything else. I wanted some small spice to leave the category of dull and uninteresting, so I ended up with this habit.”

After a short while, a likely building came into view.

“There it is. See the chimney?”

“Hey, isn’t this supposed to be Academy City, the town of cutting-edge science? Isn’t the technology supposed to two or three decades ahead of things ‘outside’?”

“It must be a cutting-edge bathhouse with a cutting-edge boiler connected to that cutting-edge chimney. Now, let’s get inside. We’re not photographers in search of retro scenery.”

For some reason, Ellen grabbed Kamisato’s hand and began pulling him inside.

Confused, he came to a stop.

“Um, I arrived here a few days ago, so the situation isn’t the same for me. To be honest, I don’t really feel any need for a bath.”

“Sigh. Well, you don’t have to and I guess it’s allowable for a boy to be the one sweaty person in a group of girls. I suppose it makes you the wild type. Ah ha ha. That’s not you at all.”

“Eh?”

Kamisato brought his nose to his upper arm.

While Ellen hid her smile behind her baggy lab coat sleeve, Elza spoke up in annoyance while holding her plastic bottle in both hands.

“I vote no to that. I don’t want to get anywhere near the guys on the baseball or judo team who claim it’s a virtue and a treasure of youth or whatever. I’m not going to flat out reject everything that sweats, but at least pay some attention to your surroundings.”

“You’re such a romantic, Elza. Or rather, you have high standards. Is your ideal guy the dashing prince on horseba-...”

“D-don’t be ridiculous!! I-I-I-I don’t dr-dr-dream about th-th-things like that, y-y-y-y-you moron!!”

“Elzaaa, I know you’re panicking, but if you beat that broken glasses girl with your bottle of coins any longer, I’m gonna have to break out my crime scene investigation toolset.”

“Ah!?”

The delinquent girl came back to her senses and finally let go of the glasses girl’s collar. Claire collapsed limply to the ground, her dress’s shoulder straps slipped down, and a few petals fell from the giant twintail-like flowers.

Staying outside was not going to help, so they entered the building.

The old lady at the attendant booth tilted her head at the extremely strange grouping of a boy and four girls, but she still invited them in as customers. They had been prepared for some kind of high-tech payment system, but they apparently only had to hand change to the old lady. For a high school boy like Kamisato, this actually felt stranger than something high-tech.

Kamisato alone made his way to the men's bath.

"See you all later."

"Oh, right. ...Heh heh. But that 'later' might be a lot sooner than you think."

A chill ran down his spine, but he decided to assume he was imagining things. The highly unique Kamisato Faction could be cruel in their words, but they were also quite caring. Ellen tended to take on the role of organizing things, so she held Patricia's hand as she waved and started toward the women's bath.

Inside the changing room, Kamisato found no other male customers. He did not hear any voices through the frosted glass divider either, so he may have been the only one there.

He bought shampoo and soap from a vending machine, removed his clothes, and entered the bath area. As he had expected, he was the only one in the large area, so he felt somehow lonely.

However, he was the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere, so being alone did not mean he started jumping into or swimming through the tub.

He sat on the small bath chair and began diligently washing his body.

It was easy to lose track of time with the lively girls around, but when alone, he tended to get lost in thought.

For example, his thoughts turned to Kamijou Touma.

He had been interrupted by the incident involving those red and black creatures and the two girls, but he could not ignore that boy either. For his group, the Kamijou issue was the main task.

He looked down at his soapy right hand.

"*Do you wish for a new world?*"

As soon as he muttered those words, everything vanished.

He thought quietly while narrowing his eyes at the clean hand that appeared as the soap bubbles disappeared.

He would find the answer.

He would make sure of it.

He then looked at himself in the mirror on the wall and he sighed.

(That's more skinny than normal. I might be in trouble if I don't start working out a little.)

How exactly would he would be in trouble?

After some thought, he realized something unpleasant was rising in his chest.

I'm not doing any of this because I want to.

He said that so often that it was losing all meaning and becoming a catch phrase, but it nearly escaped his lips again.

And then...

"...Eh heh heh."

"?"

"Oh, what's with the serious look in front of the mirror? You're quite the narcissist when you're alone, Kamisato-san. ...H-huh? I can't see. Ahhh!! Why are my glasses fogging up now!? Don't tell me it's because I switched to my cheap spares after the lenses broke earlier!!!"

"Claire?"

Kamisato turned toward the absurd voice. As a modern teenager, he was unfamiliar with the exact layout of a bathhouse, but it seemed the dividing wall between the men's and women's baths did not reach the ceiling, leaving a gap at the top. The pervert with fogged-up glasses was poking her head out from there.

Being a girl has its advantages, he thought with a distant look in his eyes.

If the roles were reversed, he would likely have had his head split open without a chance to explain himself.

He placed a hand on the side of his neck and asked a question.

"What are you doing?"

"Eh heh heh. I sent out some cable sensor roots, so I already know there aren't any customers besides us. And even if someone else tries to approach, I set them to *automatically intercept,* so we're safe. That means we don't need to worry about the

distinction between men's and women's baths. What I'm saying is, how about I wash your ba-...kyah!?"

Before she could finish speaking, the glasses girl was pulled back to the other side of the wall.

The sudden disappearance looked like someone had grabbed her leg.

Then Elza's voice came from beyond the wall.

"Don't worry, boss! I'll protect your chastity! ...Huh? Ellen's missing. Did she slip away during the confusion!?"

"U-um, she went running out of the girl's bath earlier without even putting on a towel."

Just as a bad feeling came over Kamisato, the frosted glass door to the men's bath slid open.

The girl stood boldly in the entrance.

She must have been loved by god because her long hair was plastered to her wet skin in a way that perfectly covered all the important bits. This was a new feeling. Could hair become clothing for mankind? A distant look filled Kamisato's eyes as he recalled a saying as old as asking if a banana counted as a snack. He wanted to believe that thinking of that fruit after seeing this scene was not a metaphor for anything inappropriate.

Even now, Ellen hid her smile behind her hand in a misguided attempt at elegance.

"Hah hahhh!! Blame yourselves for not keeping up with me! Now, Kamisato-han, let us get to know each other a lot better!!"

"Damn her!! Now that she's crossed that line, I'll have to act as a human shield. I am the boss's bodyguard, after all! I have no choice! That's right, I have no choice!!"

"N-no fair!! I'm his bodyguard too, aren't I!? So why was I the only one pulled away!?"

The situation was a complete mess.

Kamisato turned around and searched for an escape route, but the main entrance was blocked by Ellen while Elza and Claire were beginning to climb over the dividing wall like zombies.

He was completely cornered and Ellen slowly approached him with a smile on her face.

"You know what, Kamisato-han?"

"Yes?"

“I think you should just place the blame on us and go along with this pink situation.”

What happened next will be described in a fairly abstract fashion.

—The Fisherman Shakes Off the Kraken’s Tentacles and Escapes by the Skin of His Teeth. (In the style of a Greek sculpture)

“…”

Left all alone, Patricia quickly washed herself, returned to the changing room, and put her clothes back on. Part of it was being culturally unaccustomed to letting others see her skin, but it also had to do with Sample Shoggoth living below her skin. It was being calm now, but whenever she saw her own white skin and the blood vessels showing through, she would remember that thing that was covered in indescribable objects reminiscent of eyeballs or suckers. She would remember the fist-sized mass and the branching tentacles.

She wanted to avoid looking at it even if that did not solve anything.

The smartwatch on her wrist displayed her heartrate and blood pressure. It had originally been a health management app, but anyone who did not know about her condition would assume it was broken and needed to be reinstalled.

With nothing to do, she stood in front of the fruit milk vending machine.

(Is it a mixture of milk and a few fruit juices? Come to think of it, Leivinia likes Cinderellas and Shirley Temples, doesn’t she?)

Her sister had bragged about them by calling them non-alcoholic cocktails, but they were really just mixed drinks. Seeing this reminded her of that sister.

The sentimental feeling caused her to reach out her hand, but it apparently did not take cards. She had plenty of black cards that could be used to pay tens or even hundreds of millions of yen, but she had no loose change.

A heavy depression filled her.

She saw no ill will in the conversations among the community built around Kamisato Kakeru.

They may have had their own kind of goodness and justice.

However, that did not mean it was directed toward her.

"..."

She quietly placed her fist at the center of the down jacket covering her flat chest.

There was sweat on her bare forehead.

She hated the mere fact that this action had become a habit.

It felt the same as when a parasite spread its territory by manipulating a snail into being eaten by a bird.

Part 8

It was an unbelievable sight.

Medicine had always had a grotesque and repulsive side if one looked only at the actions and ignored the intentions. Anesthetizing a patient, cutting them open, cutting out an organ, and placing in a new one was a "good" action when one knew it was saving a life.

"Ugh."

But when viewed directly, it was hardly surprising that Kamijou felt sick to his stomach.

"Urp!"

"Oh, was a lady's bare skin too much for you?"

Birdway smiled and buttoned up her blouse. Her expression looked strained and it was likely due to more than just passing out. For one thing, what if it had not been an attack by Kamisato Kakeru that had caused her to pass out?

"And while I'm talking about having her eat this organ, there's more to it than that."

She replaced the large brooch and put on a nonchalant look.

"Threads and sheets made from corn starch are used in medicine. When used to close or cover a wound, they attach to and fuse with the human body so they do not need to be later removed. I'm creating a new organ based on that material, so it really isn't that different from some corn potage."

"Also, African magic includes a way to escape a curse by making a doll of wheat to take your place as well as a way to curse someone to death by sacrificing a doll made of corn."

Birdway nodded at Index's explanation.

“The world is filled with stories of plants or grains arranged in human form to take someone’s place. In fact, dolls made of animal matter are a lot rarer and you can’t create a doll without adding some mystery into the mix. They act all high and might about their sacrificial ceremonies, but securing a full human body is a lot harder in this day and age. They’ve had to search out replacements, so they’ve developed methods of producing the same effect as the sacrifice by eating a doll made of wheat or corn. I’m using that for my own purposes.”

Doll-sized Othinus sighed.

“That would explain why the supposedly green animal skin is red. Are you trying to grow an apple in your chest?”

It was psychedelic and grotesque.

That optimal answer seemed to rob one’s willpower just by looking at it.

But at the same time, Birdway had done enough to keep Kamijou and the others from making any kind of complaint. If she created the organ and had Patricia eat it as planned, the entire problem would be solved.

It was just as Birdway had said in the beginning.

She was not going to ask for any help and she would move her game pieces around to resolve this personal problem on her own.

The small girl placed a hand on her throat.

“All this talking is making my throat hurt. Something sweet would be perfect. ...Could you bring me a Shirley Temple? Hey, Mar-...!!”

She started calling someone out of habit, but she caught herself.

Kamijou, Index, Othinus, and Nephthys looked on in confusion as she cleared her throat.

Her face was a little red as she changed her target.

“Kamijou Touma, this is your home, so you have a duty to entertain your guests. You can find the instructions with a simple internet search for ‘Shirley Temple’, so don’t worry. A child could make one, so you have two minutes.”

“Oh, dear. It would seem spoiled little Birdway isn’t aware of the situation here. This room is currently only stocked with tap water, miso, and soy sauce! If you’re fine with some cold miso soup with no dashi, I could whip that up for you!!”

“This is even worse than I thought! This is unsuitable for human life!!”

“I completely agree, but let me add one more thing. If you hadn’t interrupted with your fight, the ingredients for our hotpot might not have gone to waste!!!!!”

This was only a petty but noisy argument, but Birdway was still the intimidating leader of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight, Europe’s largest Golden-style magic cabal. So if Kamijou Touma could drag that leader down to being a mere twelve-year-old girl, did he play the role of a joker?

Small Othinus sighed again and brown Nephthys shrugged.

“Since that solves your personal issue, can we get back to the Kamisato Kakeru issue?”

“I wish we could,” replied the fifteen centimeter Magic God with her arms crossed.

“The problem is Patricia,” explained Birdway with an irritated click of the tongue.

“Hm?”

“Didn’t I tell you she doesn’t know about magic? Even if I know this is the perfect answer using everything the magic side has to offer, I can’t tell her that. And even if I could, I wouldn’t recommend it. It would drag her to our side more than necessary.”

Any supernatural phenomena would need to be explained scientifically.

No matter how distorted it might be, she did not want to show the world of magic to her sister.

However...

“I see. Patricia doesn’t know how the magic works or how it would fix this, so from her point of view...’”

“How is she supposed to understand the logic of this cannibalization? Of course she’s going to think her sister is growing some strange tumor inside her body and then trying to force it into her mouth. Anyone would be horrified and I can’t figure out a way to convince her.”

Also, that black thing wanted Patricia’s body, so it would go on a rampage if anything tried to drive it out. That was what had led to the “sibling quarrel” Kamijou and Kamisato had been caught in the middle of. Not everything was going to go as planned.

“I’m calling this organ a fruit. Partly because I’m giving it nutrients so it will grow like a fruit, but also because it isn’t made for long-term storage. Once it finishes growing, it will rot and wither. Even if we cut it out and place in the fridge. If it’s wasted, there is no second chance. I need to make sure it grows, make sure I harvest it, and make sure it gets into my sister’s mouth. That’s the real problem here.”

"..."

"There's one other thing I'm quite curious about and I would appreciate it if you answered me." Birdway raised a finger. "Where did Patricia end up while I was unconscious?"

"Eh?"

Kamijou looked over at Othinus who only shrugged.

"At the very least, she wasn't at the scene of the battle..."

When she heard his answer, Birdway gave the look of someone suffering from a cavity in their back tooth.

"If she's wandering around alone, that isn't much of a problem."

Next, it all gathered together on a single point.

"But if that Kamisato person collected her, this could be trouble. I don't remember much, but there was one other person there and his right arm seemed to be as much of a joker as yours."

Part 9

"So Kamisato-han, do you prefer big or little boobs?"

Elsewhere in Academy City, someone else gave a completely different sort of serious expression.

After overcoming quite a lot, Kamisato had just finished the bath time that Claire and the others had insisted on.

He placed a hand on the side of his neck while speaking to a girl dragging a baggy lab coat behind her.

"What are you talking about?"

"We're talking about what happened in the bath just now, boss! You had the most unconcerned look in your eyes as you swept the fogged-up glasses girl's legs out from under her, sent her sliding along the wet floor to score a strike on Ellen, and finished it all off by grabbing my shoulders and throwing me!! How could you stay that calm? What do we have to do to get you all flustered and embarrassed!?"

“That’s right. You had such a varied paradise laid out before you, so shouldn’t one of us have gotten right in your strike zone?”

“Hmm?” said Kamisato as he tilted his head.

His neck would not crack.

He felt he needed to give some kind of answer, so he did.

“What does size matter as long as it fits with the rest of you?”

“Wah!! I don’t think this is a case of being too embarrassed to answer properly!! I really think he just doesn’t care!”

“You’ve gotta love someone who can speak excitedly about anything. I really do respect that. That’s what it means to be passionate.”

“Listen, boss, let’s start by discussing our base definitions. We can’t make these grow or shrink based on whether they ‘fit the rest of us’!!”

“More importantly...”

“What could be more important!?” lamented the glasses and delinquent girls, but Kamisato continued on regardless.

“I went along with your demand, so can we get down to business now?”

Yes, Kamisato had a lot to deal with.

Patricia’s incident needed attention and so did that of the other right hand user.

He was prepared to flip the switch and get to work, but...

“You’re right,” said Ellen. “How about we get something to eat?”

“.....”

One hand was not going to cut it any longer, so he covered his face with both hands and curled up on the nighttime road.

He truly could not understand how these girls thought.

Long-haired baggy lab coat forensics girl Ellen tilted her head despite having been the cause.

“Huh? Did I say something that weird?”

“No, not really. ...Oh, no. Is he feeling dizzy?”

“How could someone think of getting right to work when they just arrived in a new town and haven’t even tried to local food? Besides, we need to plan out what we’re going to do. Do you expect us to chat out here in the freezing December air? C’mon, we just took a bath.”

The only sensible one remaining, ten-year-old Patricia, only gently patted his shoulder.

Tears did not suit Kamisato Kakeru, so he gathered his strength and got back in the fight.

“What is this? Patricia’s incident is already straying from the main task, so when did this subquest get started? What’s next, defeating the Four Heavenly Kings who guard the barriers of the different continents and then gathering the seven crystals? Well, that’s easy. We just need to save up a hundred thousand platinum, buy our own ship, set sail for the small island at the end of the world, climb to the top of the universe tree, and ask the goddess there what to do.”

“Kamisato-han.”

“Boss...”

“I don’t know what’s got you so worked up, but seriously thinking about being reincarnated in another world is a serious warning sign. If something’s bothering you, you can always tell us.”

A distant look filled the normal high school boy’s eyes.

For some reason, he recalled a passage from a book about raising cats.

Give up on the idea of getting them to do anything or stop doing anything. Either learn to enjoy watching them do whatever they want, or do something to draw their attention away from whatever you don’t want them to do.

That thought caused something to escape him.

He placed a hand on the side of his neck and words flowed from his mouth like they were his very soul.

“There might not be anything I can do...”

A hand patted his shoulder several times.

It was Patricia.

“You can’t go crazy here. If you break, who will be there to give the sensible opinion? To be blunt, I’ve had enough of it myself.”

She was exactly right.

A normal high school boy could not just silently accept this absurdity.

He did not need to actually win the argument. He only had to keep the retorts coming.

He mustered up some courage and tried speaking again.

“I doubt this will help, but I’ll repeat myself. Kamisato Kakeru doesn’t know when to give up, so I’ll say it as many times as it takes. There’s a girl here who holds some great secret and is caught in the middle of some kind of incident. Let’s go. Let’s save her. Why can’t you get that into your heads? The quickest route is right in front of us, so I can’t imagine why we would choose to take a detour.”

But he did not get through to the girls.

Delinquent girl Elza shrugged with her wildly cut brown hair looking a bit like fox ears.

“You say that, but this is how the world works. When you reach a new land, you start with the local cuisine. How are you supposed to stay motivated without that?”

“And I can’t understand how someone could choose not to take a bath when there’s one right in front of them.”

They seemed to be operating under a different set of rules.

While boys handled everything in the “coolest” way, girls handled everything in the “cutest” way, so there was a fundamental discrepancy in their thought processes. Since he did not know their rules, it all had a lazy, shallow, bland, and unprincipled scent to it, but it was apparently an important part of their ignition process.

“Is this the monstrous product of the Yutori Education?”

“Hey, you’re our age, so don’t act like it doesn’t apply to you.”

“What years does that cover anyway? I feel like the answer has as wide a scope as the four thousand years of Chinese history.”

Realizing that persuading them with logic would be impossible, Kamisato gave up the fight. It was not that they had no logic to their argument; his logic and their logic were simply too incompatible. He decided that going with the flow would be faster than trying to install his own logic in each of them.

“So what do you want to eat?”

“Ehhhh!? That’s your territory since you arrived here ahead of us, boss!! Isn’t there...y’know, something good? An Academy City specialty or something that would give us a day’s worth of material for a blog!?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking for... As you can see, Academy City is nothing but metal and concrete.”

“Now, now. You need to actually look, boss. That kind of thing doesn’t matter when it comes to regional specialties! Hakata has tonkotsu, Osaka has takoyaki, and Nagoya has...what does it have? Was it miso cutlets or Ogura toast? Regardless, it’s got something! You have to have seen it already, but you just ignored it!! C’mon, dig through your memories!!”

“Sorry, but this city has everything from the salt butter ramen of the north to the soki soba of the south.”

“Thaaaat’s borrrring!! Having everything is the same as having nothing of your own! It’s like the souvenir shops in Tokyo or Osaka train stations!!”

“How about you apologize to the station attendants?”

As Elza scratched at her head with both hands (which needlessly jiggled her breasts), gardening club member and glasses girl Claire tilted her head.

“Is there really nothing here? It’s all like a national convenience store chain?”

“You can apparently get dishes from over 190 different countries in District 4, but I haven’t heard anything about an Academy City original. They have normal fried eggs and toast for breakfast.”

“Oh dear.”

“Although I think the meat is all cloned and the vegetables are all automatically grown in agriculture buildings. Not counting what some of the rich eat.”

Elza perked back up.

“I don’t think you know how important what you just said was!! That’s it, boss! That sounds as crazy as a burger made from a million worms! You couldn’t experience that in any other city!!”

“You’d eat a worm burger if it was local specialty, Elza?”

Ellen sounded surprised, but the delinquent girl did not seem to get the point.

“Eh? Why not? If you go to China, you’ve gotta try the scorpion skewer. If you go to Australia, you’ve gotta see what the moth larva ice cream tastes like. And if you go to

Mexico, you've gotta order the cactus steak. Why would you go to a Japanese restaurant after traveling to the other side of the world?"

With that, their dinner plans settled on the incredibly vague plan of "anything's fine".

Even buying a convenience store meal or going to a family restaurant would be enough to see what cloned meat tasted like, but...

"Wouldn't a supermarket still be open this late?

"Oh, nice choice. If the other option is a premade meal heated in the microwave and cooked a little in a frying pan, we should probably get Master Chef Elza to cook us up something good."

"S-stop that!! I-I'm not all that good at cooking! I only do it if I absolutely have to!!"

Elza blushed while holding the bottle of coins between her arms. She apparently had trouble with anything that did not fit her delinquent image.

Kamisato finally recalled that the pointy-haired boy had been carrying some plastic bags.

"Claire, Elza, you're exhausted from all this bickering, aren't you? We don't have to go all out today, so why not just go to some random gyudon shop and-..."

His collar was grabbed at Mach speed.

By who? By Ellen, Claire, and Elza at the same time.

The glasses girl in the shoulder-exposing dress spoke up with a smile.

"Some lovely high school girls are talking about home cooking in front of a boy. You can't compare that to 'some random' gyudon shop. Do you understand? Try to realize what's going on here, got it?☆"

Their aura had completely changed.

Kamisato Kakeru was hit by "Intimidate" and cannot move!!

Meanwhile, the girls quickly let go of his collar.

"Okay, let's find a supermarket to search for some ingredients. Elza will take the main role and I'll take the support role. Does that sound good?"

"D-don't just decide what I'll be doing!! But if you insist, I guess I've got no choice!!"

"Ehh? Wait, wait. Then what am I supposed to do?"

“Ellen, you’re in charge of switching on the rice maker. That’s an incredibly important job.”

With that, they entered a nearby supermarket.

The sales were all over and only the wilting leftovers remained in the fresh food section, so Ellen and Elza spoke back and forth as they looked around.

“So are we making Japanese, Western, or Chinese food?”

“I’m thinking we should make whatever we can make with this sad lineup that looks like an oil crisis just hit. Dammit, the place is about to close, but someone with some decent housewife skills bought up all the relatively decent stuff. And that rundown apartment’s gas range was pretty small, so I doubt it has much firepower. We need something easy to make, with a flavor we won’t get tired of, but that has at least a little surprise to it... A meat and vegetable combo would be good. ...Maybe stuffed cabbage or stuffed bell pepper.”

That was when a groan reached them.

They turned around and found Patricia in her skintight jogging wear and down jacket. She was still keeping her silence despite supposedly being a part of the group.

She must have realized her mistake when they all turned her way, so she looked away and blushed a little.

“Ahem.”

“Oh, what’s the matter? Do you not like bell peppers?”

“Th-that isn’t it! I’m definitely not a picky eater at my age!!”

Even adults were picky eaters, but Patricia apparently saw things differently. She may have been a bit of a perfectionist when it came to the idea of being “grown up”.

“Don’t worry. Leave it to our Master Chef Elza and the battle with your pickiness will be blasted beyond the horizon by a single beam blast.”

“H-hey! How many times do I have to tell you I don’t like housework!! And doesn’t that make me sound kind of dangerous or massive!?”

“Which side are you going for, Elza? You don’t want to seem like a maiden but you don’t want to seem like a macho either, so I can’t tell what you want to be.”

The conversation log began scrolling downward again, so blonde forehead girl Patricia cut in before some weird assumptions were made about her.

“I said that isn’t it!! I’m not a picky eater!!”

“Oh? Then I can just use a raw bell pepper. Maybe I’ll wash one up and shove the whole thing in the middle of a salad.”

“Mgh.”

“Or if you want something healthy, I could throw five or ten of them in a blender to make a bell pepper smoothie. 100% pure vegetable juice! It might taste bad, but don’t worry!!”

“Uuh!?”

Elza took pity on the tearfully trembling girl, so she let out a gentle sigh.

“...Fine, then.”

“?”

“Listen, little girl, I’m going to make a prediction. You’re going to overcome one of your dislikes today. I’ll make sure of it. I’ll rewrite your definition of bell peppers.”

“Wh-why are you trying to sound so cool? Besides, I’m not a picky-...”

Patricia began waving her arms, but then she realized something.

At some point, she had joined their conversation.

She was no longer just watching the conversation log scroll by; her own name was included.

“...Huh?”

She had been the one to speak those lines, but she still tilted her head.

Not even she knew how to define this.

Part 10

Leivinia Birdway stood out on the dorm room’s balcony.

The dorm buildings were gathered together like bookcases in a library or shoe lockers at a school and she stared at the moon in the sliver of the night sky visible between those buildings.

The blue sheet was pulled back and Kamijou stepped out.

He wrapped his arms around himself to fight the cold and let out a white breath.

“What are you doing, Birdway?”

“Can’t I at least enjoy the moonlight in peace?”

“I get that you’re sulking over the lack of a hotpot, but come on in. Watching you is enough to make *me* feel like I’m freezing.”

“You really are-...! No, never mind. Complaining isn’t going to change anything about you.”

“?”

At any rate, Kamijou and Birdway returned to the room. It was still cold thanks to the broken window, but it was better than the exposed balcony.

Inside the room, bandage-covered Nephthys still had her sensual chocolate-colored body sprawled out on the ground as she crawled over and messed with the TV remote. Index and Othinus were watching in silence.

However, Kamijou called out to stop her.

“Wait, Nephthys! The variety shows on weekday nights are always...!”

“Um?”

“...food reports, cooking contest quizzes, and other shows meant to draw the attention of housewives!!”

It was too late.

The flat screen was filled with an entire chicken. And it was fried. It was completely fried. The golden breading produced crunching and sizzling sounds as small drops of oil burst out, steam gently rose against the black background, and the camera slowly rotated around it.

“The Christmas season is here, so the sales of chicken are on the rise! Yes, we’re here at Maruichi, known for frying up an entire chicken in the fiercely fought food wars of District 15. You might think Christmas means turkey, but chicken and other birds are gaining ground and the rush of preorders has forced them to build up some emergency lines.”

The first to burst into tears was Index.

She held a hand to her mouth, collapsed to the side, and began wailing.

“Fgoumaaa

“Index, I know how you feel, but let’s try to maintain our ability to communicate!!”

As Kamijou tried to calm the girl, fifteen centimeter Othinus pressed her index finger against her temple.

“So this is what the Japanese idiom ‘poison for the eyes’ refers to. I thought you needed the thought-process of Japan’s culture of shame to understand it, but now I understand all too well.”

“Yes. As a god, receiving insufficient offerings is not exactly fun.”

“C’mon, can’t we start seriously worrying about dinner now?” asked Kamijou. “I know Birdway is in a lot of trouble, but doesn’t that mean we need to be able to bring our A game!? ...Ah.”

Meanwhile Birdway gave an exasperated sigh.

“The amateur high school boy is one thing, but the rest of you are a grimoire library or a Magic God that was willing to kill herself for her ceremony. I’m pretty sure you can control your autonomic nerves and thus control your digestive system.”

“...”

“What? Why do you look so lost in thought?”

Birdway looked to Kamijou in confusion as he silently looked down.

More specifically, he looked down at the hand on his pants pocket.

“This is...bad. I was hoping to save us, but I might have just thrown new fuel on the fire. However, even if it might help us get through this, keeping quiet isn’t my style.”

“Get to the point.”

“What if... Hypothetically now, Birdway.”

Kamijou Touma began speaking in a heavy, heavy voice as he slowly slid a hand into his pocket.

“What if the vacuum sealed fish sausage I got while trading with my classmates at an early lunch just so happened to still be right here in-...”

He was not allowed to finish.

The girls rushed forward to devour Kamijou Touma’s sausage.

Part 11

Now, it's time to eat!!

But to make a long story short, Elza felt utterly disgraced after all her boasting.

After putting on the apron with practiced ease (while not wanting anyone to notice how practiced it was), the large breasted (she also did not want anyone to notice how large they were) delinquent girl had yet to complete a single dish in the rundown apartment's kitchen.

After all...

"Who keeps sneaking 'secret ingredients' in the second I turn my baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack!?"

As Demon Lord Elza's eyes glowed red and her fox ear hair bristled, the first to avert her gaze was baggy lab coat forensics girl Ellen. Sweat poured down her face as she spoke up in a trembling voice.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Liar!! Who else could it be!? Look, this thing coming out of the stuffed cabbage pot deserves a mosaic over it! What kind of chemical flavoring did you add to make that happen!? Is it some new weapon meant for the roaches that have grown resistant in the city!?"

"Come now. That isn't what this is at all! I thought through it all logically, put together the chemical formulas, and mixed it all up according to the equations, so it has to taste good!!"

"Don't bring hexagonal chemical formulas into the kitcheeeeeeeeeeen!! We're not trying to make mustard gas in this poooooooooooooooooooooooooooooot!!"

Glasses girl Claire was collapsed by the wall in the cramped room. One shoulder strap of her apron-like white dress had slipped down and the giant tropical flowers growing from her head seemed to have wilted.

"Ah, it feels like I just had harsh undiluted American weed killer dumped over my head... How about we go somewhere else while we let the place air out? Leaving without locking up is dangerous, but the window was broken in the first place."

"If a burglar sticks his hand in the pot, we might get a reward for public service. Talk about easy."

“Are you even listening!? Just like with quantum theory, the idea is already complete. It’s just that the experiment to reproduce it inside the device happened to fail this time! It isn’t that I have no sense of taste!!”

“You need to rethink your idea from the second you started bringing up quantum theory where the result changes based on whether it’s being observed or not!!”

And so they made an emergency evacuation.

The residents of the rundown apartment were drawn out by the sudden stench, so Kamisato Kakeru bowed down and explained the situation. Among them, *an extremely short female teacher* smiled bitterly and helped out, so they avoided making the news and ending up as a trending topic on websites.

Once he was finally freed from his apology press conference, Kamisato Kakeru breathed a heavy sigh.

“To sum up, this will all be over if we leave the room for about two hours. Unfortunately, it looks like we’ll have to eat out tonight.”

“*That teacher* sure was amazing. The instant she saw Ellen’s cooking, she began searching for its weakness and sealed it off with that stuff that solidifies tempura oil. I could tell she wasn’t your average person as soon as she faced that mosaic-deserving mass without running away.”

“Huh? Does this mean I’m going to be teased about this for two or three days straight?”

“More importantly, where should we go? There are a lot of options for eating out.”

They began thinking, but the first to hesitantly raise her hand and open her mouth was Patricia.

“U-um.”

“?”

“I’m fine with anything, but I would like to try Japanese ramen. *The last time I was here* I didn’t really have time.”

Kamisato thought to himself that “Japanese ramen” had an interesting ring to it. That may have been how Westerners saw it. He remembered seeing an online news article about ramen encroaching on the territory of the previous Three Sacred Treasures that were sushi, tempura, and sukiyaki. Of course, anything in Japan was thoroughly localized for Japanese people, so there were all sorts of options that had never existed originally, much like eating pickled vegetables with curry rice. Regardless, it was an odd turn of a phrase in a number of ways.

And at the same time...

(Will the girl way of thinking allow ramen at night?)

Kamisato had no issue with heading out to a ramen place, but would Ellen and Claire be willing? He was honestly quite worried about that. He could imagine them saying they would only drink weird-colored mail-order smoothies after eight at night.

However...

“Hm, not a bad idea.”

“Yes, I think it takes our situation into account quite well.”

“Hmm?”

Kamisato’s head filled with question marks, so he tried asking about it.

“Um, are you sure? Ramen is nothing but carbohydrates and the soup is full of oil. I mean, from the perspective of girls who never take down the ‘dieting’ sign year-round...”

“It’s fine right now.”

Elza puffed out her large chest as she readily answered.

She waved a hand and pointed toward him.

“After all, you’re with us right now.”

“?”

Kamisato left with the others, even though he still did not understand the situation.

With five people in all, they were too much of a crowd for a street cart, so they decided to visit a ramen shop a bit off the main road where they would not be seen from outside. It was even tucked away enough that it had not been caught in the midair breakup of the comet that day, so its windows were actually intact. The heated air inside felt like a true luxury.

There was no android waitress to see them to their seats and no holographic images of the food floating in midair. It was a perfectly normal ramen shop.

Once they settled down at their table, Elza toyed with her fox ear hair while answering the question that had been on Kamisato’s mind.

“A lot of girls like ramen, but when it’s just us...well, that information hasn’t spread very far and it isn’t very well known. ...Simply put, it’s hard for a group of girls to go to a stubborn old man’s ramen shop.”

“Oh?”

“But this time, we’ve got you with us, boss. As a boy, you can shield us while we try out some places we wouldn’t normally be able to try. We can visit the restaurants we were interested in but seemed to have too high a barrier.”

Kamisato guessed it was the opposite of a stern middle-aged man asking a girl to go with him because he could not exactly go out and eat a parfait on his own.

A cheap fifteen inch TV was placed in the perfect spot to claim “the customers are only catching glimpses of the owner’s TV and thus it isn’t an in-restaurant broadcast”. It was apparently tuned to an extra-long two hour drama. A college boy with no real interests or skills was (for some reason) being served by several rather high-spec girls and he was using their powers like seven tools to defeat a crooked job-hunting official in a revenge story. The protagonist was played by Hitotsui Hajime. Given the crazy setting and pop culture jokes, it was probably an adaptation of a manga that was being used to raise the popularity of some of the actors.

Kamisato Kakeru narrowed his eyes a little and sighed.

“Everyone loves those simplistic things, don’t they?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

He sighed again at the united retort.

However, that peaceful time did not last long.

Ellen and Claire’s argument over the menu soon spread to everyone else.

“What are you doing?”

“You want to know what she said? She said she was going to order salt ramen for all of us! Is she crazy!? I will only accept seafood soy sauce ramen!!”

“Ehhh? Salt ramen is obviously the ticket to happiness. Claire, I’m pretty sure you’re ruining your life with that terrible choice.”

“Ellen you asshole!! Let’s take this outside!!”

As a Westerner, Patricia spat out the ice water in her mouth.

While patting Patricia’s back to help stop her choking, Kamisato scolded the glasses girl and told her not to shout English swearwords in a restaurant.

Then he spoke to someone else.

Specifically, the delinquent girl who was resting her elbows and large breasts on the table.

“What about you, Elza?”

“Ehh? Arguing over what kind of ramen is best is like a religious debate. You’re never going to get an answer. But as a personal opinion, I’d definitely go with miso ramen.”

“Pft. Are you stupid?”

“Pft. Are you stupid?”

When Ellen and Claire spat out their comment in perfect stereo, Elza joined the scuffle. Meanwhile, Kamisato stared at the menu with a bitter look on his face. There was ample variety, which actually gave no sense of focus. This was clearly not a restaurant that had worked twenty years to perfect its soup. There was soup curry ramen and tomato cheese ramen on the list, so he could feel a history of wandering indecisiveness oozing from the menu.

He handed the menu over to Patricia and waited for a while.

Once he decided it was time, he spoke up.

“Okay, let’s place our orders. Everyone just say what you want.”

A male waiter with a bandanna around his head walked over and an avalanche of voices immediately followed.

“Salt! I want salt!!”

“Soy sauce please! And with seafood!!”

“One miso ramen. Hold the pork, but add in a bunch of green onions instead.”

“Oh, then I’ll have the tonkotsu.”

“Oh, then I’ll have the tonkotsu.”

“Hm?”

Kamisato looked over at Patricia in confusion and found her just as surprised.

It looked like those two were the only ones whose tastes matched.

However, that was not the end of the conversation.

Claire and Elza started making a racket in order to recover.

“My tastes...aren’t the same as Kamisato-san’s!? I-I can’t have that. The foundation of keeping a boyfriend or girlfriend is conquering their stomach. A difference in food preference doesn’t look like much at first, but you can’t ignore it since it builds up turn by turn like poison damage. B-but I can still recover. This wasn’t anything as critical as a blood type horoscope! Right, Kamisato-san!?”

“C’mon, blood type horoscopes have no basis in fact whatsoever. And dividing the six or seven billion people on this planet into four categories sounds even more dangerous than discriminating based on race. But anyway, I’ve still got a chance here! We may have ordered different flavors, but that means we can try each other’s dish, give each other bites, and mix some together on the plate!!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll take control of that. Kamisato-han’s plate is under my management. If you want to flirt with him, then take a number. You’ll need my permission first.”

“Damn you, Ellen!!”

“Oh, is it time for a girl’s battle below the table while we smile at Kamisato-san above the table? Wait, who just stomped on my toes!? Elza, you son of a bitch, you betrayed me already!? Go kiss the devil’s ass, you witch!!”

“Calm down, Claire. Why don’t you cool down with some ice water?”

“Thank-...Ah, that was a close one! That’s the jar of garlic, Ellen!”

“Peh heh heh. Maybe I should have dumped it over your head to make sure those flowers got some.”

As she watched the girls arguing, Patricia felt like something was not quite right.

It was a sort of unease like they were freaking out over a supposed photo of a ghost but had not compared notes on where in the photo the ghost was.

She took a mental step back and observed the commotion at the table again.

And...

"?"

She finally caught on.

Kamisato Kakeru was smiling happily while surrounded by all those girls.

But to Patricia's eyes, *his smile looked somehow twisted in pain.*

Part 12

That golden retriever was a man who understood romance.

As such, Kihara Noukan's actions could not always be explained using logic and efficiency.

His walk through the nighttime streets and to a convenience store near a certain elementary school may have been one such example.

The convenience store's windows were broken and covered with blue plastic sheets, but that was not because of any kind of harassment. The midair explosion of the Arrowhead Comet had shattered most of the glass throughout Academy City.

(Perhaps I should have used a smarter method.)

A slightly bitter feeling rose within him, but the middle-aged store manager, who was sweeping up leaves near the entrance, immediately grinned when he saw the large dog with no owner.

"Oh, sensei, out of cigars?"

"Yes, the Cuban ones I have you order for me."

"You go through them fast. Are you sure you aren't smoking too much?"

"We don't have any standard values for dogs. No one has bothered to take any statistics."

"Based on body size, I would assume you could handle less than a human."

Speaking with a dog was an odd thing to do, but the convenience store manager did not seem to mind.

“Has anything odd happened around here?”

“No, not really. I haven’t seen any kids using their clothes to hide more of their skin than necessary, kids who have been ignoring a cavity for too long, or kids who have been wearing the same clothes for over a week without washing them. The kids are sharing some shocking rumors, but innocent malice is impossible to avoid with kids that age. And they didn’t seem to be attacking anyone in particular, so it isn’t a problem.”

This had not originally been the golden retriever’s habit.

It was a different Kihara who had built up a network of adults who could pick up on the SOS signals in casual conversations of children where they gathered to enjoy their allowance: convenience stores, department stores, discount stores, etc.

That Kihara was Kihara Kagun.

Known as the “worst” Kihara, he had gotten involved in the realm of human lives and souls.

He ranked at the top of even the Kiharas when it came to the number of people he had killed, but his ultimate record dropped back to zero because he had resuscitated them all with 100% accuracy.

Even if he had worked in a different field, he had found an answer that Noukan had not, seen something there, and sealed it all away.

What he had done afterwards was unknown, but he had ultimately become a teacher at that elementary school.

Whatever had led up to that, Noukan doubted it could be explained using logic and efficiency.

He too had been a rare Kihara who knew of sentimentality.

“You’ve changed too, sensei.”

“Have I?”

“Yes. How should I put it? You’re mellower.”

“Those who understand romance are blessed with opportunities to learn what is hidden in others’ hearts. And that affects both sides of the equation. But to be honest, I wish I could have known him better.”

“Kihara-sensei was an amazing person.”

“Yes, he was.”

If a dog could have formed expressions, the golden retriever would surely have been smiling.

It would have been a happy yet somehow sad smile.

“Amazing” was a clichéd word, but Kihara Noukan knew it contained infinite space between the lines. And the convenience store manager was also quite something to have readily agreed to help a certain teacher protect the children despite knowing that teacher was a Kihara.

It did not matter if he could fight or not.

His true strength lay somewhere else.

“But he was also a difficult person to be around,” said Noukan. “There were always children running around him and they would always interrupt our conversations. They would step on my tail, pull on my ears and tongue, or even try to ride me. One in particular, a Kumokawa...yes, Kumokawa Maria-kun was something like my arch-nemesis. Just thinking back to those times is enough for my tail to tuck between my hind legs.”

“You say that, but you never uttered a peep as you put up with them tugging on your fur or rubbing your belly.”

“They were far too reckless. If I were not a gentleman, I might have bitten them.”

That Kumokawa Maria was no longer in elementary school.

In fact, she had apparently grown up enough to watch over Kihara Kagun’s final moments and continue moving forward.

For that reason, this nighttime walk was meaningless.

The golden retriever continued with his task even after all of the humans had left the stage.

But the fact remained that he could not bring it to an end.

“I’ll be going now.”

“I see. ...Hey, sensei?”

Just as the large dog started to leave with a small package on his back, the store manager called out to him. The golden retriever looked back and spoke with his artificial voice.

“What is it?”

“I’m sure you have your own path to walk down, but make no mistake. Your framework of being a Kihara or whatever else isn’t what truly matters. What matters is what’s in your heart. That passionate current that tells you what you want to do will never lie to you.”

“…”

“And Kagun-sensei has already shown us just how great a power it can give us. Isn’t that right, sensei? He cast aside being a Kihara, protected the smiles of so many children, and apparently even settled his grudge with Kihara Byouri in Baggage City. That’s what matters, not what you’re born as or what group you belong to. So, sensei, you don’t have to act so tough.”

The dog made no rebuttal.

He accepted what the manager said as meaningful.

He was a man who understood romance and the original seven had given a mere dog that sensibility.

“If you’re ever tired of your role as a Kihara, you can come to my place. You might think I’m talking big for a convenience store’s hired manager, but *I’m always living right alongside everyone’s lives.* Kagun-sensei was the same. Everyone has worries and there’s nothing shameful about admitting it. People aren’t made well enough to come up with the perfect answer the first time around. I doubt you’re an exception, sensei, so there’s no need for you to insist on continuing to be a ‘sensei’. If it gets too painful, you can always set down that burden at least for a while.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

After giving his respectful thanks, the golden retriever left the convenience store.

He looked up into the night sky.

With all the lights of the city, there were almost no stars visible in that dark canopy. Only the round moon shined there.

To repeat, he was a man who understood romance.

And so he spat out the next words based on that sensibility, not based on logic or efficiency.

“What an unpleasant light. It feels like an ill omen.”

Part 13

After taking a bath and eating dinner, it had grown quite late.

If this were an RPG, this was when they had walked from one end of the world to another, found a continent they could not reach, acquired a ship, switched to an airship, defeated the Four Heavenly Kings, flown to the alternate world, gathered the seven crystals, and broken the barrier around the demon king's castle.

So what were they to do now?

As soon as they returned to the rundown apartment (after checking to make sure it was safe), fox ear delinquent girl Elza spoke up.

"Ahh, I'm exhausted. We should probably get to sleep for tonight, don't you think?"

In that instant, the tiny person inside Kamisato Kakeru's head peeled away all of its skin and transformed into a muscular demon.

He completely forgot to place a hand on the side of his neck and his tone dropped a pitch.

"Holllllll

That “who cares” was the problem.

That crude dismissal was common among girls these days.

Kamisato’s mouth flapped opened and closed as he turned to Ellen and Claire. He used silent eye contact to search for a reliable comrade to help him out, but...

“Th-that’s right. I’m feeling tired too. The weariness is really hitting me now. ...Although I think that might have more to do with you plucking out my flowers just now.”

“Either way, we’re mostly waiting for the results of the analysis running in my container lab. Plus, I’m really not the type for direct combat, so go off and do that on your own if you want. I’ll take care of things here.”

Majority rule could be a frightening thing.

No matter how wrong the answer was, it ended up looking like the standard way of the world. And with those girls holding three of the votes, Kamisato and Patricia had no chance.

So...

“Okay, let’s take turns brushing our teeth and then lay out the futons. The window’s broken, so be careful not to catch cold. ...Oh, no!? What are we supposed to do! How do we lay out five futons in a 4.5 tatami room!?”

“Yeah, there isn’t room for one of them.”

“Someone’s obviously going to have to sleep in someone else’s futon.”

They tried a variety of layouts, but eventually ended up laying four futons along the outer edges like a windmill or shuriken.

This of course did not leave enough room for the fifth one, but...

“Did you know that the 4.5 tatami room has its origins in Ginkaku-ji’s tea room? It wasn’t originally a room for poor people. Instead, it was for the rich who enjoyed condensing all of their luxury into a small space.”

“Yes.”

“But by arranging the four tatami mats like a shuriken, the half tatami space in the middle was used to place the tea set. That way everyone could sit around the room and enjoy the tea.”

“I already knew that.”

Kamisato still looked pale as he stopped them.

“But why am I in the center space? All I can do there is curl up in the fetal position.”

“Um, isn’t that because you lost the game of rock-paper-scissors?”

He could hardly argue against that, so covering his face in his hands and sobbing was his only option.

Baggy lab coat girl Ellen covered her mouth with a sleeve and laughed.

“Heh heh heh. If it’s too cramped for you, feel free to join me in my futon. I always have space for you in there!!”

“Stop being so blunt. The boss doesn’t know how to react.”

“Oh, and if Elza tosses and turns too much, come take refuge in my futon. If you don’t have a shelter prepared, you’ll be in trouble.”

“I-I do not toss and turn that much!!”

Elza blushed and argued back, but no one was listening. The disinterested mood hanging in the room was enough to know who was telling the truth.

Before long, it was time for lights out.

Patricia’s situation had not changed and he had yet to contact Kamijou Touma again. He had plenty of problems, but there was little he could do when the girls refused to move. For the time being, he went along with it all.

…

…

…

And after about an hour, a small form got up in the dark room.

It was Patricia who had not gotten a wink of sleep.

In her short time with them, she had started conversing with them a little and she had learned something.

They were not especially bad people.

That did not mean they would not fight with someone, but she at least knew they had not initially approached her in order to harm her. They had their own objective and her problem did not fit into that objective, but they had *gone out of their way* to interfere in her issues. In other words, they were kind people.

However...

(That won't make it in time.)

Elza had claimed Patricia's problem would not cause the world to explode if it was not resolved before midnight, but it might as well have meant that for Patricia.

She could not afford any lost time. A human life was all or nothing. If she was the slightest bit too late – an hour, a minute, or even a second – she would lose everything.

And once that happened, the world might as well have exploded as far as she was concerned.

This was the pillar that supported her life and she could not allow it to be broken.

She would not insist that someone help her. She had started this on her own to protect her own life.

So she slowly and silently got up and tiptoed through the dark room while being careful not to step on the boy and girls tangled up on the floor.

She put on her shoes and faced the locked front door.

For some reason, she looked back just once.

Had she gained something from her interaction with them that made her hesitant to leave?

She decided the answer was yes.

It had all been too sudden and they had lacked delicacy and words and actions, but they were not bad people. She had shared a bath with those girls and she had been able to eat at a ramen shop she would have had difficulty visiting otherwise. Once she removed her initial caution, they were all valuable memories that she would never have experienced in England.

She had not accepted them, she had shaken them off, and she had ignored how they worried for her regardless of their own interests and how they had welcomed her in with good will. But she had done so because of her own selfishness.

She could not trust them.

They had tried to help her relax and to get closer to her, but she had ignored their efforts, justified her actions with her lack of trust, and taken advantage of her weakness by playing the victim and gaining an unlimited forgiveness for her actions.

She was aware of that, but she still shook herself free of it and slowly unlocked the front door.

She then slipped outside into that lonely world.

She left the rundown apartment and entered the nighttime city. Even with that strange black bubbling thing inside her, she thought of who mattered most to her and who she wanted to protect no matter what. That other girl had currently turned into a different monster based on a set of rules Patricia did not understand.

She did not know where that other girl was.

Nor did she know how to draw her out.

Patricia had been the one on the run because she had wanted to stay as far away from what her sister believed to be a disturbing solution to the problem.

But during their clash today, she had realized something.

Simply running away would not end this. She would be too late.

Her sister's limit was much closer than she had thought. If she ran away, her sister would not give up and remove that thing. She did not know what kind of *heretical science paper* her sister had found that in, but that tumor-like thing would press on her sister's organs within a day's time and possibly even kill her. She had not performed an accurate ultrasound echo, but the rate of growth visible from the outside was enough to know it was straining her sister's skeleton.

So she had to find her. She had to take action. There were probably only a few hours left until the tumor's growth overwhelmed her sister's skeleton and "the world exploded".

"*Leivinia...*"

She spoke the name aloud without realizing it.

She had no clues. She did not even have the first hint to take the proper steps toward approaching the answer. Still, she looked all around her as if searching through the grass.

She searched with her feet.

She seemed to be searching for a ring thrown into the dark sea.

"*Leivinia!!*"

This was a never-ending open world.

No linear path was prepared for her, she could take as many shortcuts as she wanted, she could wander as much as she wanted, and infinite possibilities were contained within. If she made the wrong kind of effort or chose the wrong initial direction, even continuing for one million years would not produce any results.

There was nothing she could do.

And as clever as she was, the worst possible prediction began to appear somewhere in her heart. She became aware of it, grew to hate it, sealed it away, and resumed moving her feet while clinging to the temporary hope inside her.

Before long, a dull throbbing pain filled the soles of her feet.

Her breathing grew shallow and her chest felt tight.

Impatience and pain spiraled through her head.

Her smartwatch began emitting a warning color.

That health management app monitored her heartrate and blood pressure, but they had been a complete mess already.

However, a wicked side of her whispered in a corner of her heart. Part of her was rejoicing as the number of hurdles grew. *Haven't you done enough?* it asked. *You did your best and you let everyone in the city see how hard you worked despite how powerless you are. So give up. You left some scars and marks behind, so just give up. Do that and you can enter that sweet position of the "poor little girl" who wanted to protect something precious, did her very best, yet couldn't quite manage it. You'll get a special position as the person everyone unconditionally gives treats to, pities, and always gives top priority to.*

That was the joy of being weak.

It was the special privilege of the weakest.

She shook her head, faced forward again, and continued walking to every place she could think of.

As her weariness grew, as her pain grew, and as she continued to not find her sister in place after place, that part of herself began whispering again. It asked her if she truly, truly intended to save her sister. Was any of this effort real? Or was she simply making a show of trying to save her so that others would praise her for being so heroic?

"No..."

She clenched her teeth, let out a rough breath, and leaned against the pillar of a wind turbine.

Her legs were exhausted and she had trouble walking, not to mention running.

And yet, she still had not searched even a quarter of District 7. That was hardly surprising once she thought about it. Academy City had 2.3 million residents and that number only increased when adding in travelers and business visitors. How far was a one-girl search even going to get her? That was not even enough to find a cellphone dropped in a small shopping district.

So...

You knew that from the beginning, didn't you?

Wearing yourself out, hanging your head, and clenching your teeth while leaning against that pillar is all a part of the lovely show you're putting on, isn't it?

You don't really care about your sister, do you?

Say it.

You're afraid of being seen as the wrongdoer who abandoned her sister, so you want to be seen as the victim who was crushed by remorse.

"No! No!! Nooooo!!!!!!"

Patricia collapsed to the base of the pillar while facing the weakness in her own heart. Had she truly run out of strength or was she putting on a heroic show now that she had decided she could give up? Not even she knew anymore.

There was nothing she could do.

She could only win the participation award or the effort award now.

Besides, what could she even do if she was miraculously reunited with her sister?

Did she have a way to remove that "bomb" in her sister's chest?

“Uuh...”

She could not even stand up, so she sobbed in a ball on the ground.

“Uuh...!”

If she had been a little dumber, she might have continued her useless effort without any of these idle thoughts and she might have been satisfied with that.

If she had been a little smarter, she might have immediately located her sister and extracted that “bomb” in a way no one else in the world had ever considered.

But she did not have what it took.

So...

“What, are you not going to struggle any longer?”

Still on the ground, Patricia looked up toward that voice.

Someone had arrived to make up for what she lacked.

He was the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere.

He was someone so bland he seemed to blend into the background.

He was Kamisato Kakeru.

“How long...have you been here?”

“How long indeed.”

“How much...do you know?”

“How much indeed.”

Had it all been playing out according to his wishes? Had their trip to the bath and to get something to eat been a plan to incite Patricia to movement with the time limit approaching? Had forcing five futons into a 4.5 tatami room been a way to make sure a member of his group would notice if she did take action? And had he continued observing her after setting things up so she would reveal the truth of her problem that she was not telling them?

Or had he truly not given it any thought? Had the trip to the bath and to get something to eat simply been inconsiderate actions? Had forcing five futons into a 4.5 tatami room been a pure coincidence and was he only a pathetic boy who was completely whipped by the

girls around him? Had his appearance here been yet another coincidence with no real meaning behind it?

It could have been either and it did not really matter which it was.

What mattered was the fact that Kamisato Kakeru was here.

“Didn’t I tell you that we would investigate if you didn’t tell us? If you had told us, you could have chosen the extent of the truth and only told us what we needed to know, but when it comes to us investigating, you can’t choose the truth we learn. So we saw it. You have a tendency to passively go along with anything, but we saw the impatience that made you leave those preset rails and take action.”

“…”

“What are you going to do? Continue like this? You have two simple commands: tell us or have us investigate. Ellen has a personal lab and her analysis of that black thing that came from you is already underway. I’m sure a few more truths will present themselves in the short time until that’s complete. Are you sure you want that? As I said, when we investigate, you can’t choose the extent of the truth we learn. If you hide this, something more than what you fear will show up. Are you sure you want that?”

Patricia thought about what he meant.

And she was indeed clever.

“That’s...not fair.”

“No, I suppose not. I haven’t been doing this long, but I hear that a lot.”

“That doesn’t really give me an option. Whether I say yes or no doesn’t matter. *Once you say you’ll save me, you saving me is the only option left*. I’m stuck on those rails no matter how much I complain that you’re meddling or that I don’t want your help.”

“True.”

He was not the kind of person that started worrying after he said he would save someone.

By the time he said he would save someone, he had already set everything up. Even if she tried to run away, grew defiant, pushed him away, or whatever else, *he had sealed off all options except for sitting idly by as he saved her*.

Even if she refused to explain her situation or ran off into the night, he was sure to reach her regardless. He would approach the core of the issue via a different route than her and step nonchalantly onto the final stage.

And the normal high school boy who made that sound like a forgone conclusion said more.

“But is that a problem?”

He gave no excuses when it came to saving people.

If he did provide any alternative explanations for what he was doing, they were sure to be lies.

And when it came to saving people, any amount of greed was permissible. No matter how unfair, despicable, or cheap his methods were, it was all forgiven by the final result.

Forgiven by who?

That went without saying.

He would proudly say that he forgave himself.

“I have this thing in my body.”

Still sitting on the ground, Patricia spoke up in resignation.

Inside her young yet well-formed face, something seemed to wriggle and tug at the soft skin of her cheek. It was surfacing from its dive. It looked like a slithering snake or a mollusk tentacle. It was covered in tons of bubbling protrusions that resembled eyeballs or suckers glowing like wet glow-in-the-dark paint. It permeated her neck, her collarbone, and within her clothing.

Even through her thick down jacket, an ominous pulsation was visible at the center of her flat chest.

“It’s a parasite from the Antarctic. It’s an unknown type that dissolves the fat of the human body and slips inside that empty space. It’s not very contagious, but it’s extremely lethal. If it were forcibly removed, I would definitely die.”

“I see.”

“My sister is trying to do something about this. I don’t know if it’s supposed to be a repellent or something to transplant. I don’t know how it works or even if it would really work, but I can’t rely on my sister’s method.”

“Because you would die if it failed?”

Patricia shook her head.

“Because even if it worked perfectly, my sister would die as soon as the method was complete. I mentioned a risk before, but...the odds of her death are 100%. It’s certain.”

“...”

“She holds a bomb in her chest. It’s like a tumor...but not really. From what I’ve seen with long-distance ultrasound scans, its rate of growth is highly abnormal. At this rate, it will place pressure on her heart and lungs...no, it could even cause her to burst open. The limit is...probably before tomorrow morning. And she doesn’t seem to care.”

“I see.” Kamisato placed a hand on his chin. “So saving you means your sister’s death, but saving your sister leaves no way to heal you.”

“You believe me?”

“It honestly doesn’t matter if what you just told me is true or not. Either way, we will eventually learn the truth and arrive at the conclusion whether you like it or not. So you don’t need to convince me. I’ll step onto your rails for now.”

He sounded incredibly careless.

He was completely ignoring her feelings, but that was the reverse-side of an unconditional trust that would force no responsibility onto her if he failed. It was to remove the possibility of him saying, “It was because you lied and kept things from me that I didn’t make it in time at the very end. You essentially killed her.”

“What matters is what you want to do based on that scenario. You want to save you sister. Since you’re searching randomly around here, I assume she’s somewhere in Academy City. So. What would you do if you did happen across her? How would you save her?”

“Well...”

“You have to have had an image in your mind, no matter how absurd it might have been. Otherwise, you would not have ‘given up’ on us. There had to have been a set of scales in your mind when you left the room. You were weighing A against B, obeying us against acting on your own. You were thinking about which would be more effective.”

“...”

“Removing the bomb in your sister’s chest is your top priority, even if that leaves you with no way to survive,” declared Kamisato Kakeru. “But you don’t actually have a way of doing that. Not many people have the skills to surgically remove something. And it would probably be difficult if you relied on that Antarctic thing inside you. That wasn’t what you were relying on. So what means of saving your sister were you thinking of besides removing the bomb in her chest?”

Patricia did not answer.

If she did not tell him, he would investigate on his own. And when he did that, she could not decide what truth he found.

It was just as he had said.

“The answer is simple. You were trying to remove the motivation behind your sister’s actions. The quickest method would be to eliminate yourself so she no longer had any reason to hold that bomb inside her. You intended to sacrifice yourself from the beginning. And even if you have no means of removing that bomb, the sister who placed it inside herself most likely does. So you were trying to throw your own life away to get your sister to act. Would that be checkmate?”

“Uuh...”

“That would explain your previous actions. It would explain why you looked somewhat heroic and yet seemed to be enjoying the pain of harming yourself. You were working up the resolve to take your own life or perhaps losing yourself in the role to weaken the realistic fear. You weren’t trying to find your sister. You were showing yourself that you’re a small person who could never find her no matter how hard you tried. You were holding a dark smile at the fact that you didn’t even deserve to live and it was all a way to prepare to take that final step. Your time limit was not about when you had to find and rescue your sister. It was when you had to prepare yourself to die.”

“Uuuuh!!”

Patricia bit her lip and sobbed.

Think of it from her perspective. This was why she had gone along with the Kamisato Faction’s carefree trips to the bath and ramen shop. She had wanted to live it up and make some nice memories in preparation for the very, very end. Because she had no future, she had joined those strangers without thinking of the consequences. That was why she had stuck with them to the very end. Whether she had wanted it or not, she had decided that lively atmosphere would be her “final day”.

Changing the initial assumptions could shine a completely different light on things. No matter how cruel the truth might be, it could not remain hidden once it was investigated and discovered. It would all be revealed.

“But you couldn’t do it, could you?” Kamisato let out a quiet breath. “No matter how much you set the mood and no matter how romantic, sentimental, and heroic you made yourself feel, you couldn’t choose to throw away your own life, could you?”

Let your sister live.

Throw away your life for your family’s sake.

Even the most noble of reasons did not mean one would be able to go through with it. And Patricia had been unable to do so. Would she hang herself, slit her wrists, or jump in front of a train? Only she knew what end she had pictured in her mind, but she had been unable to do whatever it was.

And that had made her feel all the more pathetic.

Her sister was risking her life to save her family. She was constantly fighting the fear of growing a tumor(?) inside her at such an abnormal rate that it was sure to burst out from within. But Patricia had been unable to respond in kind. She was taking a shortcut that would take her life instantly, yet she still could not keep her hands from trembling.

So...

“Hey, can you tell me one thing? How do you define salvation?”

“?”

“I have a power known as World Rejecter.”

As he spoke, Kamisato Kakeru casually closed the loosely opened fingers of his right hand.

And a moment later, the wind turbine Patricia was leaning against was “devoured” from partway up.

She had no idea what had just happened.

She was so confused that she did not even feel fear as the remnants collapsed in another direction.

She felt something intense prickling on her skin.

Kamisato continued speaking without a change of expression.

“You can see how powerful it is. *Although the conditions it needs can be a little tricky*. But as long as those conditions are met, I can erase anything from this world, even a Magic God. ...It technically isn’t killing them, but the result is pretty much the same. If separating two people so they can never see each other again is what you would call death, then World Rejecter brings death to all things.”

“Ah.”

“I can guarantee you it brings no pain. I’ve never tried it on myself, but based on those who have been kept alive for a bit, hope for a new world fills their heart. It can’t fail. As long as the conditions are met, it can erase even the sun or a black hole in a single blow. And it does not leave a gruesome corpse. No one will have to discover you. And while I

can't tell you what lies on 'the other side', I can at least tell you there's *something there*. Death does not take away everything and erase every last trace of you."

"Ahhh!!"

"So, what will you do?"

Kamisato Kakeru waved his right hand in front of the girl.

Patricia's eyes were glued to it like it was a hypnotist's pendulum.

"It only takes an instant. It truly is the ideal tool for suicide. I've erased plenty of things, so I would know. As long as you meet the conditions, I cannot fail. So I want to know your definition. What is salvation to you? If it is liberation from the weakness that prevents you from taking the final step even though suicide would save your sister, then I present to you the most efficient method. I will erase your existence in a single blow and rob your sister of her motivation to carry that bomb. So what will you do? *Is this salvation to you?*"

Kamisato Kakeru continued waving his right hand as he took a step toward the girl sitting carelessly on the ground.

With incredible pressure, that all-erasing right hand slowly arrived over Patricia's head. It blocked her view of the open starry sky. She could do nothing as she looked up at it. If he moved his hand even slightly, she would be torn from this world just like the wind turbine.

"*Do you wish for a new world?*"

This was right.

It was the best method of protecting someone important to her.

She would feel no pain or suffering. It would all be over in an instant.

If she accepted this wonderful method, he truly would be her savior.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

That's right.

But...

"...No."

Patricia suddenly found herself speaking.

Her weak self was making another appearance. Someone else was going to see it. The intense shame and disgust scorched her body, but she could not stop the words from escaping.

“I don’t want that. I don’t want to die here!! I don’t care if it’s selfish or useless. But this is just taking the easy way out! I’m dying so I don’t have to see what comes next! That wouldn’t save my sister. I couldn’t be proud of that decision!!”

At the very, very last second, Kamisato Kakeru heard those words.

He heard the words of this desperate girl who no longer cared what anyone thought and had tears and snot dripping down her face.

“I have to save my sister. I can’t let her plan continue because the tumor inside her will kill her, but if I die first to rob her of her motivation, she’ll have to live with the label of someone who abandoned her family! Neither of those options will save her!! Neither of us can die!! No matter how much I have to struggle, no matter how pathetic it might be, and no matter how cheap it has to be!! If I don’t find a third option, I can’t save her!!”

She was still sitting down and her legs were too weak to support her, but she still looked up into the absolute power of Kamisato Kakeru’s eyes and raised her voice.

“So!! I don’t need your salvation. I don’t need an easy way out and I don’t want a new world! I won’t throw anything away and I’ll continue to struggle in this world. If my sister is going to throw everything away for me, then I’ll find an option that doesn’t require that!! It doesn’t matter what options I have now! If I don’t have one, I just have to make a new one! I’ll create one!! And to do that, I don’t need a power to help me run away and avert my gaze from the harsh reality! I need a power to break through it all and continue forward! I need a power to oppose it head-on!!!!!”

He heard her.

Her words reached him.

He accepted the cries of her soul.

And once he did, he simply placed his right hand on top of her head.

There was no pain.

There was no fear.

But why would there be? He had touched her with the right hand holding the great power known as World Rejecter, but her body remained intact.

“My power requires certain conditions to activate,” he explained with a gentle smile. “The biggest one seems to be conflicting desires. For example, saying you want to escape your closed environment yet not wanting to give up your life surrounded by girls, fearing your weapon yet delighting in how different it is from those around you, or whispering that you want to live happily with your girlfriend yet not wanting to destroy your harem. It also works on anything created by people like that. People with those conflicting desires want to cling to this world yet also wish for its destruction, so I guess it’s easier to find a starting point with them. ...On the other hand, it seems to have difficulty with people who have a single goal in mind and never waver. No matter what I do, the exiling power doesn’t work on them.”

“Ah.”

Clever Patricia gradually realized what that meant.

The readings on her smartwatch shot up.

It seemed to have captured a kind pulse.

But at the same time, Kamisato Kakeru continued giving his answers. It did not matter whether she told him or not or whether she told the truth or not. He would continue toward the conclusion on his own, just like he had said.

“This right hand did nothing to you because you have the strength to see a single path to follow in this shitty world, Patricia. I admire that strength. I honestly think it’s amazing. ...You did well. You overcame the negative ideas held by humanity.”

He kindly rubbed her head.

When he removed his hand, she wished he would have kept it there a while longer.

But this too was a necessary ritual.

As he continued, he held his right hand out toward the small girl.

He directly faced her as someone he considered an equal or even greater.

“So I want to shake hands with you, who can hold this hand. And could I maybe help with the work you need to do? I won’t be saving you. I will simply be a part of *your* legend.”

Shaking hands was a simple action anyone could do.

But at the same time, it was the ultimate signal only allowed of the truly worthy who had overcome the conditions for World Rejecter’s activation by finding a single path after overcoming the conflicting desires that did not let one simply say yes or no.

Patricia hesitantly reached out her hand.

Kamisato simply waited.

Finally, the young girl grabbed the hilt of that ultimate weapon.

“Please...do.”

“I know I shouldn’t be saying this after setting you in this direction, but this won’t be easy.”

“I want to save my sister no matter what it takes. I want to repay her for not hesitating to throw away her life for me. Even if I don’t know how to solve this and even if it means cutting my own lifeline, I want to live a life I’m proud of to the very, very last moment!!”

“Even if you follow that path to the end, you will not find peace.”

“That’s why I want your help. I have no idea how to remove that bomb from my sister’s chest, so I want to use everything available to me. It doesn’t matter if you can actually do anything. Please join me to help me...no, to help my sister!!”

“If that is enough. If you will maintain that superior heart that holds to a single path no matter how much it is shaken and no matter how many easier desires are laid out before it.”

Kamisato Kakeru smiled as he took the girl’s hand.

His grip was truly strong.

“I respect you and I won’t hold back when it comes to helping someone I respect. I will use everything I have and fight the entire world for you.”

Part 14

Several girls were gathered on a rooftop a short distance away.

They were Ellen, Claire, and Elza.

“See? I told you it would turn out this way.”

“Well, this is how it always goes. To be honest, I personally resent it a fair bit, but if we told him to stop, he wouldn’t listen and he’d just run off on his own.”

“It looks like the others are here too. They’re busy finding positions on all the rooftops around here.”

While holding her plastic bottle full of ten yen coins like a baby, the delinquent girl with fox ear hair glanced over at the other buildings.

There were several...no, a great number of them.

The countless presences filled the darkness with an intimidating pressure.

“So the Kamisato Faction has gathered, has it?”

They were not aware of it because this was normal to them, but all of them contained a powerful light that was, in a way, greater than that inside a Magic God.

They claimed they wanted to protect the world and they did not hesitate to cause destruction toward that unwavering end. They did not contain the kind of conflicting desire that led one to create another option because Imagine Breaker’s possessor seemed uncertain.

“Umm, I’m more about logistical support and tend to stay behind, but both of you are his direct bodyguards, right? Kamisato-han looks ready to rush onto the front line without a thought to his original objective, so what are you two going to do?”

When the girl with long black hair and a baggy lab coat dangling behind her asked that exasperated question, the glasses and delinquent girls both shrugged.

“We’ll just do what we always do.”

“That’s right. We’ll destroy anything that gets in the way. Won’t that be enough?”

Today’s Hotpot Party, Ingredients List 3

Soy sauce. Miso.

Chicken breast, daikon, bok choy, cabbage, bean sprouts, shirataki, tofu.

Bouillon, salt, sugar, pepper, champon noodles

Bargain vanilla ice cream, canned yellow peaches, canned pineapple, canned mandarin oranges. (For dessert)

Fish sausage.

Cannibalization Fruit (Made by Leivinia Birdway, rare item)

(Quick Memo)

Othinus: “Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaait!!”

Index: “Who did this? How did this happen!?”

Kamijou Touma: “This is insane!! What kind of hotpot is this supposed to be!?”

Birdway: “Don’t freak out. It’s just an offal hotpot. Besides, didn’t I tell you it’s made from corn? It doesn’t matter as far as the magic is concerned, but I had a fake one grown on the outside to test the shape and composition. Now, how should we cook it so a picky eater like Patricia will eat it?”

Nephthys: “A fist-sized mass floating in the middle of a giant pot? I just don’t get Japanese food.”

Between the Lines 2

A kingdom fell and its culture vanished, but its rituals remained.

Because it was not protected by the world at large, its interpretations grew more secret, grew more focused, and generally escalated.

For example, during an extreme drought when a single cup of water was impossible to find.

For example, during a plague when the value of human life became as flimsy as paper.

For example, when all of the stored grains were devoured by a swarm of insects in a single night.

Or when fear permeated someone and they wanted a way to ensure they would never feel that way again.

Looking through the legends of the world’s religions and mythologies would reveal plenty of cruel stories. People were decapitated, had their hearts removed, were burned at the stake, etc. etc. Even the very foundation of the world’s largest religion was an execution. Then came the initial period of persecution and later the witch hunts in the middle ages. But even looking past those, there were stories of a nun gouging out her own eyes or people gathering the brains of a saint after his head was split open.

Simply viewing the actions was not enough to judge the essence of the matter.

There were reasons and thoughts that led to those results.

But among the extremely focused rituals, that kind of essence tended to be lost. They grew more sensational and grotesque as people saw special meaning in doing something no one else was doing.

“Ah...ahhh...”

Somewhere sometime, a man was weeping.

“Ahhhhh! Ahhhhhh!!”

It had been an experiment to prove the existence of heaven. Egyptian mythology was a religion that believed in being reborn, resurrected, and reincarnated. Mummies were made to preserve the physical body for when the dead’s soul would return from its temporary time in the underworld.

That meant one could manage their body and soul.

One faction decided to prove it. A young maiden was given a sheltered upbringing in a clean environment to maintain her purity until a certain age. She was to be killed based on a certain ritual, have all of her organs save her heart removed and stored in containers, be filled with sawdust to maintain her shape, and be wrapped in linen soaked in medicines. To ensure she was not assaulted in the afterlife, her crotch would be sewed shut. In Egyptian mythology, one’s heart was removed and weighed to judge whether they were good or evil, but this experiment was using that heart like a signal to see where “a certain something” went after it left the body.

Would the gods detect their wicked thoughts and close the gates of heaven?

Or would the gates of heaven be opened because the sacrificed maiden herself was free of sin?

“Uuuuuuuuuuuuuhhhhhh!!”

The girl was known as the genealogy of sinners.

By the faction’s values, she was a sinner, so it may have been only natural for her to offer up her life.

The girl herself wished for that.

She believed a burden would be lowered from her shoulders on that day.

She had no complaints.

That tragedy alone may have spread through them all.

“Maybe no one will stop it. Maybe no one questions it anymore. Maybe most of the world isn’t even aware of this misfortune and maybe no one would care what’s happening on the other side of the planet even if they did.”

The man who was collapsed on the ground spoke under his breath as if cursing something or clinging to something.

He knew that girl would smile at and greet anyone, would smile as she ate any food without being picky, and would respect anyone who knew what she did not. He knew she was a human being who could laugh and cry, and not just an entry in some paperwork.

Although that may have only been due to the twisted purity inputted into her by the project.

However, did those behind this project really understand?

Did they know she had taken a step beyond that?

Did they know about the small flower she grew behind the building?

There alone, she would be honest to her preferences. She would pout her lips depending on how the flower was blooming and she would uproot the surrounding plants if necessary.

That was a sign of something not in the prepared plan.

It was evidence that she was no longer the doll she was made to be and was constructing her own identity.

And yet he had no choice but to trample it underfoot.

“I should have been able to say this is wrong! So won’t someone please weep with me? Won’t someone stand with me as I lament how wrong this is!?”

The “work” would soon begin.

The girl’s entire body would be altered by a mechanical process.

The journey would begin.

Just as so many magicians had hit a roadblock here in the past, this would most likely fail to control or measure the soul itself and it would simply waste a life.

But just before it began….

“Yes, your voice has reached me.”

Something was there.

Even the man who saw the miracle could not determine when the miracle had begun. He simply saw a brown goddess wrapped in bandages standing before him and he saw the tears welling up in her eyes.

“I am Nephthys,” she said. “I am a goddess who objects to the legends of death that are treated as necessary sacrifices in our mythology. So let us weep, no matter how pitiful it might be. Let us accuse all that claims perfection yet could not reject death.”

A moment later, a shrill cry caused all matter to vibrate so intensely that the entire faction was instantly turned to ash.

CHAPTER 3

The Girls' Desires and Their Intersection.

Winner's_"APPLE".

Part 1

Let us look down upon it all from a god's eye view:

Leivinia wanted to save her sister Patricia even if it meant sacrificing herself.

Patricia wanted to save her sister Leivinia even if it meant giving up on herself.

Kamijou Touma was supporting Leivinia.

Kamisato Kakeru was assisting Patricia.

That was the structure of this incident.

The world's secrets and the whereabouts of the Magic Gods did not matter. Regardless, it all would lead to a clash between the two right hands hidden behind it all.

Part 2

"Oh, no! It's already past ten! This goes beyond the supermarkets! Even some of the restaurants are going to be taking their last orders now. If we don't do something fast, we'll be stuck with convenience stores and gyudon shops. What are we going to do about dinner!?"

Kamijou was trying to draw attention to a pressing issue, but Birdway immediately dismissed his opinion.

"You're weird."

“No, I’m not! In fact, not being hungry here is what’s weird!! Besides, the rest of you were just fighting over Kamijou-san’s sausage!! You rushed at me like wild animals with drool spilling from your mouths and hearts in your eyes! I didn’t know a girl’s look of desire could be so scary!! Tremble, tremble!!”

“J-just as a warning, you should be careful what you say, human. Gods have little tolerance for disrespect.”

Othinus cleared her throat, but Kamijou did not seem to be listening.

“Dammit, I know it was necessary, but it hurts that I left those supermarket bags behind. No, that must have helped someone. That mother and baby cats must have needed it to get by in the cruel city!!”

Even with the plastic sheet covering it, the December chill mercilessly slipped in through the broken window. Add in the empty stomach, and clothing was the only one of the three necessities for life they had. The snowy mountains idea that going to sleep meant death began playing in the back of his mind.

While they had the kotatsu, its heater was nearly useless in this situation. Or rather, housewife Kamijou would not allow them to turn it on full blast with the window open due to how it would affect the environment and their monthly heating bill. He needed to keep himself warm from the inside, so he greatly regretted the loss of hotpot ingredients.

“Hey, wait! The TV again, human!?”

“Don’t worry, Othinus. They tend to show five-minute news programs on the hour. There isn’t much chance of a sudden gourmet bomb like before.”

He turned on the TV to see if the weather forecast would give the current temperature, but he found a two-hour special of a drama instead. It seemed to be about a college boy with no especially noticeable features surrounded by oddly high-spec girls as he attacked a crooked job-hunting official.

A close up of curry soup with bright steam filled the screen and Othinus used a skewer spear to stab Kamijou in the butt as he sat on the floor.

“Why you!”

“Ow!! I was wrong! I’m sorry!! Dammit... Why are they making this show all about food?”

“I was careless too. At this time of night, the sponsor field at the bottom of the screen generally has the name of a food company, right? This is a campaign for winter curry or something.”

“The drama itself looks interesting, but it’s too much for our stomachs right now.”

Kamijou sounded relatively carefree, but Index and Othinus started commenting on what they saw on the screen.

“That’s awful.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Eh?”

When Kamijou looked over at them, they had a dead look in their eyes.

“Why would he hide in a locker inside the girl’s locker room to escape pursuit? There had to have been two or three doors on the way there and he had to slip past about thirty people on the way. Not to mention that there was even a janitorial supply locker in the hallway.”

“I don’t get their standards for embarrassment. That girl slapped him for an indirect kiss, but she doesn’t seem to mind letting him see her panties like that.”

“Ehhh? Is it really that weird? Ehh?”

“That’s awful.”

“Your life must be just as awful as this drama if you can’t tell what’s wrong with this.”

“Ehh?”

Realizing the discussion was getting nowhere, Kamijou started to reach for the remote he had thrown to the floor.

But then something entered the corner of his field of vision.

Brown Magic God Nephthys’s face was covered in tears and snot.

“Eh? Wait, what!? What’s the matter, Nephthys!?”

“B-bwah...hghbgh...”

“I didn’t catch any of that, but here are some tissues!! Blow your nose!! Did you want to eat some curry soup that badly!?”

Just like when dealing with a small child, he balled up a few tissues and held them to the brown beauty’s nose. As her shoulders trembled, she finally recovered enough to speak again.

“Yes, yes. Sorry about that. I’m just so susceptible to this kind of thing. ...Crying with someone is part of my very essence, so I just can’t stand it. Oh, no. Here it comes again! Fwehhh!!”

“The tears are pouring like a waterfall again! How can you possibly get this invested only thirty seconds after changing the channel!?”

“Well, she’s the crying woman who is paid to weep at a funeral. That’s probably why she’s so quick to tears.” Othinus did not seem to care much. “But even if she’ll cry at cheap melodrama or feel her heart warmed by a picture book that adults can enjoy too, *that very aspect of her* is what makes her a true Magic God that can easily destroy the world. The easier she’s swept away by emotion, the more frightening and violent her systematic divinity is.”

“Sob, sob. Othinus...you’re mean.”

“Now, she’s crawling around like a baby!? She’s got some weird switches, doesn’t she!? I don’t think I like the idea of a god being this easy to influence!!”

Kamijou could not help but shout at this frightening discovery.

Fifteen centimeter Othinus stepped on the remote’s button to switch off the TV and then pressed a finger against her temple.

“Let’s ignore that emotional idiot and get back on topic. You’re suggesting we head out, but have you forgotten that our last trip for food is how we ran across that Kamisato person?”

“I really don’t think we’ll run across him two or three times in a row. We’re not talking about some girl running around with toast in her mouth.”

“Sob. But Kamisato Kakeru must have his own food problems, right?”

“Are you serious? So as long as he’s wandering around in search of dinner, we can’t get anything to eat in peace?”

“Touma,” sharply cut in Index. “Let’s get him.”

“That is not what I’d expect to hear from a nun!”

The only one there with a full stomach was the calico cat which was still sleeping on the floor with its stomach sticking out.

“We only have miso and soy sauce here.” Kamijou reconfirmed their starting point. “But heading out into Academy City tonight could easily lead to trouble with Kamisato.”

“So what’s the answer?” asked Index.

Othinus, Nephthys, and Birdway were looking his way too.

Not one of them was satisfied with this situation. They would make fun of him if he commented on it, but he could not ignore it either. The overall atmosphere made it clear he would be pummeled with retorts if he did not find an actual solution.

“Whoever said we had to leave the dorm? We can just borrow some meat and vegetables from someone else in this same building.”

His first stop was his neighbor’s room.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu’s cooking skills were nearly hopeless, but his stepsister was Maika the Maid Master. That meant his refrigerator was periodically filled with food and ingredients. And since he did not cook himself, the odds were good he had some extra stuff lying around in there.

Plus, Tsuchimikado could not complain about lending Kamijou something. When his stepsister had made a sudden visit before, he had grabbed everything he did not want her to find and stuffed it in Kamijou’s room. Index had found it after returning from a walk, which had led to some misunderstandings. Kamijou was prepared to bring that up for some high-pressure negotiations.

“Hey, you idiot! I’ve got something to discuss with you, so get out here!”

He rang the bell twice and knocked loudly on the door, but there was no answer. He thought the boy might be out, but the electricity meter was spinning.

Then the force of his knocking caused the door to slowly creak open. The day’s commotion must have broken this room’s window too because it was chilly inside.

“...?”

Kamijou had a bad feeling about this.

He felt like something as yet unseen had happened. He felt like he had stepped onto some strange rails.

What had happened in this room one wall away from his own?

Unable to fight the chill that ran down his spine, he remembered all the allies in his own room. There was no rule saying he had to set foot in here on his own.

“Hey, Inde-...”

As soon as he started turning back for his own room, his feet were forcibly stopped.

He glanced down and saw something extending from the cracked door where it wrapped and tangled around his right ankle. Was it a thumb-sized rope? No, it looked like more like a vine.

“Wha-!? Ah!”

It was already too late.

The attack was made against his ankle, so he needed to crouch down before he could use his right hand.

He was tugged backwards and toppled over as he was dragged inside the strange room.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

He slid into the center of the room while filled with dull pain as he bumped against this or that.

His neighbor was nowhere to be seen and instead the World Rejecter boy stood with his back against the wall.

It was Kamisato Kakeru.

“Hi, Imagine Breaker. We didn’t finish our last chat thanks to that interference, so how about we try again? *I’m sure you’re busy with those red and black things,* but you want to rid yourself of some worries before taking action, don’t you?”

The fact that the boy was standing there with a thin smile on his face meant several things.

With the most important one in mind, Kamijou reflexively clenched his teeth.

“Where’s...Tsuchimikado!? Don’t tell me used your right hand to-...!?”

“Is this really any time to be worried about others? Honestly, now.”

Kamisato snapped his fingers.

The vine was still wrapped around Kamijou’s ankle, but Kamisato did not hold the other end. It extended out past the plastic sheet carelessly covering the broken window and then off the balcony. And now, even more violent power filled it.

“Ah, ahh, ahhhh, ahhhhhh, waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He was tossed outside.

It may have been for the best that he did not use Imagine Breaker to break the vine. That would have been like destroying an invisible roller coaster's rails to toss himself out into the air.

He was forced into a seven story dive between the buildings.

Below, a giant net was prepared made of more vines. He sank into it and it absorbed a certain amount of his momentum, but it must have reacted to Imagine Breaker as he flailed his limbs around because the net snapped and he dropped to the asphalt.

"Gyah!!"

As Kamijou writhed around on the road, Kamisato Kakeru did not hesitate to leap into the open air. A new net was formed and it neatly caught him.

"I have not erased that Tsuchimikado boy. I only had him silenced for a short while."

"...!!"

Kamijou reflexively tried to drag his aching body away, but he finally realized another presence was approaching through the darkness. And it was not alone. Including Kamisato, he was surrounded from three different directions.

"Allow me introduce you. This is Claire."

"Nice to meet you."

Even though it was December, the girl wore a dress that left her back exposed. Her black hair was tied back in twintails and she wore large unfashionable glasses. White stockings with a garter belt covered her legs. She looked fairly obedient, but something else overturned that impression entirely. Tropical flowers grew from either side of her head like giant hibiscuses. A closer look showed colorful flowers covering her back as well.

"She is a type of Gemstone and her body's cells are apparently more like plant cells than animal cells. I suppose she technically belongs to the science side. She can violently amplify the bonds of algae and fungi and she can absorb metal or plastic to use their traits. Simply put, she can devour a modern weapon and construct a missile or chainsaw out of nothing but plants and flowers. It increases the risk of something going wrong, but she can also combine or rearrange them to create something brand new. Like a remotely guided chainsaw. Her power is more about regeneration than being a solid barrier, but she's still perfect to act as a shield."

Kamisato Kakeru pointed at the other girl.

"And this is Elza."

"Is this seriously your opposite, boss?"

The girl had large breasts and wore a long red skirt and white sweater which looked somewhat like a shrine maiden outfit when combined. Her long brown hair was cut roughly away, leaving tufts that resembled fox ears on either side of her head. She seemed to be holding something in both hands, but it appeared to be a two liter plastic bottle. The way she rocked it like a baby was kind of disturbing and it rattled whenever she did so. The contents of the bottle were copper colored, so was it full of ten yen coins?

"She's from the magic side and she uses 'something like a' Kokkuri to possess anything she wants. It can apparently be a coin, a person, or even herself. She absorbs the enemy's fighting force like in a game of shogi, so she's quite useful."

Kamisato Kakeru was dangerous enough on his own.

If what he had said was true, taking them all on at once would be a bad idea. And there was no guarantee he was being entirely truthful here.

(He had no reason to lie in wait in the next room. If he wanted to, he could have attacked my room at any time. This isn't an issue of whether he knows where I am or not. He's hiding some other technique that found me when he had no hints whatsoever. I can't escape this just by finding a new hideout!)

"Let's talk."

Kamisato almost seemed like he was joking.

"If you do that, I'll call them all off. Or would you prefer to get this started without speaking?"

"..."

Kamijou thought about his room.

Othinus was only fifteen centimeters tall, Nephthys could barely stand and walk, and Birdway was hardly in top form due to that fruit in her chest. Index was the only one who could move freely, but having to cover for the other three meant she was essentially restrained. His room was on the seventh floor, so there was nothing they could do if the stairs and elevator were blocked off. He did not know what kind of nasty fighting force Kamisato had waiting nearby and he had a definite means of tracking them even if they did escape.

They were cut off at every turn.

Kamijou tried thinking of every possibility, but this opponent had truly been thorough. He had only shown up after setting up everything for checkmate.

"What could we possibly talk about?"

“I understand you’re worried, but there’s no need to rush this. Those *red and black things* have become a lot of trouble, but there’s no helping that. People like us are always calling in that kind of trouble.”

Kamisato Kakeru winked as if he were enjoying himself.

“But personally, I really want to deal with my own objective. And that has to do with World Rejecter and Imagine Breaker. I think it’s time we exchanged opinions on some things.”

Part 3

Kihara Noukan visited a hangar in District 7.

He had an Anti-Art Attachment hangar in each of the twenty-three districts, but this one was disguised as an industrial refrigerated warehouse.

No one would question its presence, but no one would ever think to peek inside either. It was a black box that could use up quite a bit of electricity without raising suspicions.

As he looked across the rows of weapons, he spoke to someone over a communicator.

“You did a good job in such a short time. Completing the overhaul despite the ridiculous schedule shows just how big a problem you think this is, Aleister.”

“What is your honest opinion about this?”

“They must be abnormal indeed to not be caught by your observation network. That isn’t something that can be slipped past with a cyber attack, so it would have to be pure stealth or *some odd ability to unconditionally erase or reject anything influenced or created by you*. But I can’t imagine what would follow those rules.”

The golden retriever walked through the hangar that had fallen to room temperature after the refrigeration was fully deactivated.

“And I lose track of their level altogether when you start asking such silly questions. What happened to that plan of yours? Even if the situation branches out infinitely, isn’t it all supposed gather back at the same place in the end?”

“I will deal with this somehow.”

That statement did not sound careless.

The glimpse of slight anguish lurking behind those calm words helped Kihara Noukan grasp the uncomfortable feeling that had filled him this entire day.

“I see you still can’t rid yourself of everything unnecessary.”

“What are you talking about?”

“But let me tell you one thing. I liked that side of you. Between good and bad, it would be near bad, but between like and dislike, I quite like it. That is what I’m saying.”

“…”

It took Aleister a moment to respond, but he finally did.

“*Sorry*.”

“Don’t worry about it. I will struggle in my own way. You can look forward to seeing just how much of it remains within the scope of your predictions.”

The Anti-Art Attachment had been thoroughly polished up in such a short time and that acted as a small offering from the Board Chairman of Academy City. It was all in the palm of his hand, but he would still destroy it. He had washed his hands of all the irregular elements that continued to appear and he had finally set his eyes on recovery, but he would still leave the possibility of that recovery’s destruction. That was the kind of softness he held inside.

Between good and bad, it was bad, but between like and dislike, Kihara Noukan liked it.

When it was to this extent, he could hardly get mad.

“This might be the last time we speak, so I’ll use this opportunity to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“Aleister, I will not stop you from perfecting humanity. You can do as you wish. But don’t abandon your humanity. I know for a fact that there were people who walked by your side because they were drawn by that humanity.”

“…”

After a few seconds of silence, the transmission came to an end.

The golden retriever sighed at the carelessness that silence conveyed because it was exactly the kind of softness he enjoyed.

Part 4

After a glance from Kamisato, the girls named Claire and Elza vanished into the darkness. However, that was not enough for Kamijou to relax. Having an unknown number of them hidden in the darkness was far more worrying.

Kamijou and Kamisato walked away from the student dorms.

World Rejecter spoke as they walked down the dark road.

“Didn’t it seem sudden?”

“…”

“I’m not talking about *those red and black things*. I’m not talking about the events of today either. I’m talking about a more fundamental issue. World Rejecter? What’s that? If something that convenient was out there, wouldn’t the history of this world have turned out quite differently?”

Kamijou did not carelessly respond.

It was not that he did not have any ideas in his head. He could not tell what the other boy expected or what putting him in a bad mood would mean.

Even with the High Priest, it had begun with a conversation and he did not want to go through two citywide commotions in the same day.

“That’s hardly surprising.”

Kamisato laughed as he spoke.

Looking at that small slice of the conversation, it looked a lot like a scene from a normal school.

“I only received World Rejecter just the other day.”

“What?”

“I’m not exaggerating. I noticed something off around the beginning of November, but I didn’t realize it was a power residing in my body until only two or three days ago. Hunting down the Magic Gods was something like my very first battle.”

In his very first battle, he had annihilated all of the world’s Magic Gods.

There was no point in even bringing up his lack of experience. World Rejecter had made up for all of that. This news only made the boy more frightening. What kind of a monster would he develop into after he went through more battles and gained that experience?

"So you weren't wrong if you thought this was sudden. That first impression was correct. Congratulations, Kamijou-kun, you seem to have gained something as silly sounding as a truth of this world."

"..."

The beginning of November was after World War III had ended and when Othinus's actions via Gremlin had come to the surface.

Two or three days before was when Othinus's issue had come to an end and St. Germain had appeared.

What had the High Priest, Nephthys, and the rest of the true Gremlin been thinking during that time and what had they been losing hope in? Thinking on that gradually revealed what had led to World Rejecter residing in Kamisato Kakeru.

Yes.

It had happened when Kamijou focused on Othinus individually rather than the Magic Gods as a whole. The more definitive that change had grown, the more their hearts had shifted away from Kamijou.

Eventually, they had started to desire a replacement.

He did not know what dreams the Magic Gods had originally held concerning him and Imagine Breaker, but they had begun to wish for a different solution.

They had wanted a backup plan and they had gotten it.

What if a special power was forced onto someone like that and what if they had been forced off the path they had previously walked?

"*Do you see my situation now?*" Kamisato laughed as he walked alongside Kamijou. "I don't care if you find it disturbing or look down on me as some strange guy, but there is one thing I want you to know. Until very recently, Kamisato Kakeru was the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere. If I was involved in an incident concerning *some weird red and black things*, I would have been the poor first victim who was killed in one blow and left to rot in a garbage dump. I didn't turn into this because I wanted to."

He clenched and opened his right hand.

That power could instantly kill a full-power Magic God. That horrific weapon could eternally exile someone to another world.

And yet...

“That you can find...anywhere?”

“Yes,” immediately confirmed Kamisato. “You might find it surprising, but I’m not from Academy City. Nor am I part of some group from England or Rome. I truly was born ‘outside’, in a normal town, a boring regional city, the kind of hometown anyone can picture in their head. That’s where I lived as a high school boy who was average in both academics and sports.”

“Then...what were those girls!? One was a Gemstone and the other used possession magic!!”

“As I was saying...”

In that instant, a sticky darkness filled Kamisato Kakeru’s eyes.

Those hopeless eyes seemed to absorb all light without reflecting any of it back.

“Including them, we were all *supposed to be* normal students.”

“...”

“Claire was the class’s obedient gardening club member who barely stood out. She would only give me a quiet greeting when entering the classroom and we weren’t even close enough to eat lunch together. But I loved watching her pour as much love into the plants as she did other people. It calmed my heart.”

Something seemed off about that description.

Or perhaps it was the present situation that was “off”.

“Elza was a bit of a delinquent, but she was a childhood friend who lived next door to me. We had stopped speaking, but we thought that was perfectly normal. I honestly respected her desire to stand out and not blend in even if it meant fighting against society.”

How had it ended up like this?

What had been the trigger?

Kamisato Kakeru clenched his right fist hard enough it looked like blood was going to seep out onto his nails.

“*But this thing ruined them all.*”

“...”

“Salvation is a frightening thing. People grow dependent on it and it ruins them. And thanks to that, they’re all lazily clinging to it. Hey, Kamijou-kun. Think about this from a normal point of view. If you go to a bathhouse, is it normal for girls to rush into the men’s bath saying they want to wash your back? What about having girls unconditionally wish to cook for you and having that somehow end up as a mysterious mass that deserves a mosaic over it? What about placing five futons in a 4.5 tatami room and sleeping with no division between a boy’s and girl’s space? ...Logically, that would never happen. If their hearts were working properly and they were acting on their own intentions, they would never be standing in a position that allows for these accidents in the first place. Yes, and Patricia’s case was frightening too. She must have *important memories and someone she cares for even more*, but the next thing I knew, it was all about to be overwritten. To be honest, she’s *started to shift* a little. I’m not sure how to put it, but happening across me was a mistake in and of itself. There must have been someone better than me to deal with that troublesome incident, but it’s like she started losing sight of that fact. No, it would be more accurate to say I was making her lose sight of it.”

“That’s not...”

“If I save someone even once, they begin to grow dependent. A mind of steel and century-old bonds become brittle. ‘I should rely on him next time too...no, I should stay with him at all times so that ‘next time’ will never happen in the first place. As long as I’m with him, I won’t have any problems at all.’ That thinking has gathered so many girls around me as if they’re serving me. ‘He’s so amazing, so maybe I should go on a bit of an adventure myself. If it would help him and give me the right to be by his side, maybe I should leave the category of normal.’ That thinking had transformed so many normal humans.”

“That’s not true!!”

“Hey, Kamijou-kun.”

Kamisato ignored him with an exhausted smile on his face.

“*How is it around you? Are you surrounded by that dreamlike world where girls gather unconditionally around you after undergoing a sudden transformation?*”

“...”

“And despite my complaints, those transformations bring some useful skills, so I end up using them when I’m in a pinch. They become a card in my deck. ...Yes, in that way, Patricia was truly in a precarious position. If she had been poisoned any further, she might have started looking for a way to control that black thing that looks like a collection of fat or a deep-sea octopus. Maybe she could have learned to have it latch onto a target and become an expert at destroying people from within.”

Calm down, Kamijou told himself.

He had been presented with this question more than enough during his fight with full-power Othinus. He had been told again and again that, had he not saved the girls and someone else had instead, they would have followed that other person and not him. He had been told the good will turned his way was nothing more than that.

But he had overcome that.

He would not be swallowed up by a comparison like that.

Kamisato Kakeru was not Kamijou Touma.

"If I say those girls started liking me after I saved them, it makes you want to argue back at me, doesn't it? It sounds like I'm saying I had control over a switch in their hearts, doesn't it? But what if I put it another way?"

Kamisato continued in a disinterested voice.

"Hey, Kamijou-kun. What if you had never saved anyone in your entire life? Do you think anyone would have turned your way? Are you conceited enough to think you're such a perfect model, inside and out, that so many people would have accepted you if you were just standing there?"

"..."

"You aren't, are you? Everyone's focus on the individual named Kamijou Touma truly comes from the fact that you saved someone. They're judging your personality, physical strength, reflexes, intelligence, philanthropy, or courage based on that action. In other words, you cannot escape saving people. As a person, you are inextricably attached to the act of saving. That is what I'm talking about. After all..."

Kamisato paused for a moment.

Then he confidently spoke to the person he was comparing himself to.

"*Kamijou Touma is nothing more than the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere.*"

Kamijou's mind was shaken.

He hated the fact that he could not deny it.

He only needed to look at it in reverse.

Kamisato was not questioning what Kamijou Touma had done.

He was saying it was strange for a normal high school boy to have continued doing that for so long. A normal high school boy should have died somewhere along the line, so he had to have something special to have continued for so long.

That something was what resided in his right hand.

If that something was taken from him, he truly would be dragged down to the level of a normal high school boy.

And the important part was not whether he had that power in his right hand or not.

The important part was what Kamisato was truly trying to say.

Yes.

"We did not gain these powers because we chose them."

"..."

"They came from the dreams of all magicians. Or to be more specific, the Magic Gods who individually make up a large percentage of that power. Their selfish desires created these strange powers and placed them in our right hands. And that power twists the actions of the girls around us, creating this ridiculous harem army. Like with Patricia, even those who have some other important person are forcibly dragged into it until they unwaveringly obey that single path. ...Goddammit!!"

Kamisato kicked over a nearby trashcan.

Was he acting unlike himself because he was irritated or because the presence of his right hand was making him bolder?

"Can you allow that? Can you allow the world to revolve around a single person, where everything is overwritten for that one person's convenience without a thought given to anyone else's situation? Can you, Kamijou Touma!? I didn't want to be the center of all these girls' attention. I was fine not speaking with my childhood friend and not having any real connection to that shy gardening club member in my class. The normal scenery surrounded me where normal people freely used their normal hearts. I was satisfied living as a mere part of that!! But!! Those Magic Gods interfered!! They were probably grinning as they discussed it. They were probably saying they'd make me popular to make up for the complicated role they were forcing onto me. They probably thought it was a small thank you, a bit of an extra reward. That's all. That's all? That's all it took to twist people's thoughts and emotions to your will!? Those gods would be forgotten to history if no one worshiped them and they have the nerve to invade the human heart!!!!?"

Kamijou sort of understood.

Kamisato Kakeru had the power to reap Magic Gods by the dozen, but that was only the method. He had also needed a reason to take such extreme action. If he had started annihilating the Magic Gods, it meant he had a reason worth using that method.

This was where the core of his hatred lay.

He did not care about the fate of the world. He had no interest in some legendary battle.

Someone close by had been toyed with.

Even if he had no real connection to them, those "respectable people" who lived by their own free will had been remade into simple actors to win his favor. Time and again, he had seen someone with a solid will have their heart turned into something like a fried and freeze-dried pack of food. How long he had known them was irrelevant. Whether they were a childhood friend who he had known for more than decade or a girl he happened across on the road just today, they were affected equally, uniformly, identically, and indiscriminately.

Did he think the power in his hand would vanish if he defeated all of the Magic Gods who had created that twisted dream?

Or did that not matter and he simply wanted to take revenge for what they had done?

But...

"Hey, Kamisato."

"What?"

"I can't see into alternate realities, so I don't entirely understand this talk of things being twisted from how they 'should have been'. I've sometimes felt people expected an awful lot from a mere high school boy, but that doesn't prove what – if anything – that had to do with the power in my right hand or the wishes of the Magic Gods. There's no debug mode for life. You can't add in and remove each individual factor."

"That's called being conceited, Kamijou Touma. You...no, we have nothing outside of our right hands."

"Then..."

Kamijou no longer faltered at what he was being told.

He felt like he had grasped a vague outline of something from this conversation.

"*What exactly do you want to tell everyone?*"

.....

“Eh?”

“You’re saying a lot of complicated stuff, but if you sum it up, it comes out to this: no one’s saying what you want them to, and you don’t like it. You can’t forgive the Magic Gods for twisting things in a direction you weren’t expecting. They ruined your plans, so you’re going to go punch them. ...Hey, in that case, what did you even expect of the world?”

“What...are you...?”

“How are we supposed to know what’s deep in people’s hearts? We can’t use Psychometry or some kind of magic to read residual thoughts. All of those initial conditions you mentioned are nothing but your predictions, right? You’d stopped speaking with your childhood friend? Maybe she had wanted to speak with you like this the entire time. You were happy just watching the gardening club member? Maybe she actually wanted to grow flowers with you. Hey, Kamisato, why can’t you look at things in a positive light? Maybe the Magic Gods did distort something, but they might have only given those girls the last little push they needed. How long you know someone means nothing when it comes to trust. A girl you happened across on the road just today might simply have wanted to thank you for bothering to work so hard to help a stranger.”

“What are you talking about, you moron!?”

Kamisato Kakeru shouted at him like he could not believe what he was hearing.

He placed a hand on the side of his neck.

“How conceited are you? We’re nothing but the kind of normal high school boys you can find anywhere. We’re average or below in everything. And you think someone would fall in love with a person like that? You think this ridiculous harem is a natural thing and the Magic Gods only gave the girls the last little push? What kind of convenient fantasy world do you live in? Or have they already poisoned you and tamed you this much?”

“Like I’m saying.”

This time, Kamijou cut in.

“*Why can’t the girls around you look up to the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere?*”

“...”

“There’s no rule saying they can’t. You made up that limitation yourself. You’re the one that assumed you have nothing, you’re the one that assumed no one around you would feel thankful, and you’re the one that assumed nothing like this could happen to you!! You don’t have to be an idol or a sports star. Everyone in the world thinks they’re amazing. *Now, I can’t say anything about the people around me* because the two of us are different.

But at the very least, don't you think the people around you who could say, or wanted to say, that they loved you would see that as enough of a reason to gather around you!?"

It was a hopeless argument.

It had no evidence or proof.

But that was normal. They were talking about the human heart, after all.

When talking about who someone looked up to, thought was amazing, or fell in love with, you did not need to take fingerprints or extract DNA data from a hair.

"Hey, did you ever actually check with this Claire, Elza, and whoever else there is? Did you go around asking each one? 'You originally hated me, didn't you? There's something wrong with this cooperative relationship, isn't there? Your good will and feelings for me are fake, aren't they? They're all due to this right hand the Magic Gods gave me, aren't they?' Hah! I'd bet my life that you'd be lucky to only get a slap in return. Of course, it still looks to me *like you need a serious punch from someone at some point*."

A sound like a dry branch breaking rang through the night.

It had come from Kamisato Kakeru's neck.

He had been unable to crack that joint before, but he had just forced it with a powerful swing of his head and the same grinding as a manual transmission's gearstick reached his entire palm.

"...Heh."

World Rejecter's lips twisted up into a smile.

He had previously spoken with an overly-familiar tone like they were creepily licking each other's wounds, but it was gone now.

The two of them were similar, but they were decisively different.

The annoyance and disgust with this similar person covered his face.

"I had thought I could lighten this burden a little if I spoke with someone in similar circumstances."

"Sorry, but we're completely different. No two people are the same. The fact that you judge people using something so shallow is proof that you weren't actually looking at me as a person. You were only looking at my right hand. You only view the world through your selfish ideas of being different or being the same and you force the image and role you want for yourself onto your surroundings."

“But it turns out we’re different. We’re fundamentally different. You have been poisoned by your gift from the Magic Gods. You see nothing wrong with receiving it and you don’t question it. It’s made you so conceited that you’re satisfied being surrounded by convenient girls. You’re nothing but scum.”

“Let me sum up what you’ve got wrong. What do you understand about others? No one understands that. Not even the Magic Gods do. *Don’t get so conceited, Kamisato Kakeru*.”

“Don’t look down on me while clearly trying to defend your worldly desires, harem accepter. Can’t you tell which one of us is deciding how others feel for their own convenience?”

The two boys’ gazes clashed.

They looked like they were about to lash out at each other.

“Have you forgotten?” asked Kamisato as if spitting out some cumbersome curse. “It was the Magic Gods who gave me this power. A portion of your power leaked over to me because they lost hope in you. If not for that beginning, I never would have had this power, my surroundings would not have been distorted, people like Patricia, who must have already had someone they truly cared about, would not have had their hearts overwritten. In other words, you too stand at the scene of the outbreak.”

“So you’re going to kill me too? It’s true I might be part of the cause. Maybe my own cowardice caused World Rejecter to be made. But I refuse to apologize to you. Kamisato Kakeru, you were meant to wield that power. You should thank the Magic Gods for giving you the chance to realize something you wouldn’t have realized on your own and for giving the one last push those girls needed to gather their courage and take that first step.”

“*I’ll kill you*.”

“*Are you trying to act tough, you ungrateful bastard?*”

They were talking about gods here.

If the gods went on a rampage, they might harm people, but there was something wrong if that was the only way they were being described. If they truly were gods, then this turn of events was not that strange.

A god’s role was to make people happy.

Even without some special circumstances, they would bring happiness to people.

They used their great power to make the difference between god and man known.

In Kamijou's battle with full-power Othinus, the most frightening world had been the one of happiness. When the High Priest had talked about their "scorer", he had mentioned the right to control destiny as a reward. Whatever the reason might have been, the Magic Gods were beings who spread happiness.

So...

Somewhere in their hearts, it was possible the Magic Gods had thought about using Kamisato Kakeru. They might have had the pathetic idea of acquiring a backup.

But at the same time, they would have felt a little bad for doing so. It may have not reached the surface of their arrogant minds, but there must have been a thorn somewhere in their hearts. So they had sent out that small push toward happiness. That was the identity of the changes around Kamisato Kakeru.

Why could he not consider that kinder possibility?

He was like a small child talented in the piano or violin who pouted his lips wishing that talent was not keeping him from playing with the others.

Where did the fault lay? With the Magic Gods? With the world? With the girls surrounding Kamisato? With the people carrying all sorts of problems who had happened across him while wandering about and had asked him for help?

No.

That was not the case.

Kamijou Touma stared straight at his enemy.

He glared at him and thought to himself.

The fault obviously lies with the weakness of his own heart.

He had been unable to rid himself of doubt because he could not trust in others.

He had settled on a pitiful definition of himself because he could not trust in himself.

He had placed a defensive line in his heart, insisted that nothing that was happening could possibly be real, and was too afraid to accept the happiness before his eyes. He had wanted to believe that they did not actually love him because he wanted to avoid the shock of finding out that: "Pfft. You actually believed it? The Magic Gods set this all up."

In truth, he had wanted it more than anything, but he would look like a fool if he got all excited about the love letter in his shoe locker and it turned out to be nothing but a cruel prank.

So in his fear of that possibility, he had torn the letter to shreds and desperately tried to justify it with his suspicion of everything.

It was possible the girl who had sent the letter was crying somewhere, but he was afraid of even thinking of that possibility and instead desperately viewed them as a villain in his mind.

Kamijou Touma then summed up all of his thoughts.

"You idiot."

A moment later, the world ignited.

A deafening explosive roar rang through Academy City's night.

Kamisato Kakeru had not even swung his right arm.

A carnivorous plant large enough to swallow an elephant rushed from the darkness like a wall.

Kamijou negated the giant maw with his right hand.

Did it have no sense of pain or had it swallowed the pain behind its expressionless face?

"..."

The plant girl stood below a streetlight a short distance away with her glasses giving off an inorganic sparkle. Her white dress was blowing in the night breeze.

Kamisato placed a hand on the side of his neck as he spoke.

"I had intended to offer to spare you if you handed over the Magic Gods you're sheltering, but I doubt you would agree to that."

"Like hell I would."

"Then this means war. I don't care if this is your home. I need to settle things with the Magic Gods who did this to those girls."

Nothing Kamijou could say now would get through to Kamisato, so he said something else instead.

"You mentioned a Patricia. Then are you familiar with the family name Birdway?"

"Of course. I know it very well."

That was enough for Kamijou to grasp the basic situation.

That was one more point of opposition between them.

And then he continued.

“Then why did you choose to help her? I thought you disliked the saving power the Magic Gods gave you.”

“It’s true I didn’t gain this power because I wanted it. If I could rid myself of it now, I would. And I do need to pay a visit to the Magic Gods who forced it onto me.”

Kamisato spat out his response.

“*But that doesn’t mean I can abandon someone who needs help.*”

“...”

“That too will act as revenge against the Magic Gods who abandoned everything with a smile on their faces,” he muttered. “And if you happen to know a Leivinia Birdway, then ask her for some more details about the situation. Given your personality, I doubt you would be innocently agreeing to help her if you knew the whole story. You need to ask for all the information.”

That was all.

Kamisato Kakeru left Kamijou and the plant girl named Claire walked alongside him. As his back faded into the distance, more and more people joined him, creating a single large group. There was a girl with a large pirate hat, an eyepatch over her right eye, and a miniskirt. There was a girl in pajamas with a ton of antennae sticking out of her backpack and unnatural surgical scars on her neck. There was a ghost girl in white floating inside an artificial mist machine. There was a girl dressed exactly like Magical Powered Kanamin. There was a cheerleader girl with plastic pompoms. There was a girl in red Japanese armor with swords attached all over her body. There was a phantom thief girl dressed in full-body tights. They were all from a different world not centered on Kamijou Touma. That world existed somewhere besides Academy City and may have covered as much ground as Kamijou’s own world. Before long, the group vanished into the darkness.

After watching them leave and finding himself all alone, Kamijou spoke to himself.

“Oh.”

Hadn’t Nephthys said that Imagine Breaker had not resided in Kamijou Touma by chance? Hadn’t she said something had drawn it to him and that Kamisato Kakeru may have had something similar inside him?

And that was...

“He really is a hero loved by everyone.”

Kamisato simply had not realized it.

And ironically, even as Kamijou Touma watched that other boy leave, *he had not realized the same about himself.*

Today's Hotpot Party, Ingredients List 4

Soy sauce. Miso.

Chicken breast, daikon, bok choy, cabbage, bean sprouts, shirataki, tofu.

Bouillon, salt, sugar, pepper, champon noodles

Bargain vanilla ice cream, canned yellow peaches, canned pineapple, canned mandarin oranges. (For dessert)

Fish sausage.

Cannibalization Fruit (Made by Leivinia Birdway, rare item)

(Quick Memo)

Kamijou Touma: It's a miracle. We're right back to square one!!"

Othinus: This is a good example of how seemingly good ideas from you rarely lead anywhere worthwhile."

Between the Lines 3

The religion of Egyptian mythology had been lost to the long, long span of history, but it had fortunately left behind plenty of records. They had been well preserved and great progress had been made in their analysis, so their system of gods, their rituals, and their views of life and the soul had been gathered together.

It was also a geographically convenient religion.

For Western Europe and its modern Western magic, that mysterious world was only a quick trip across the Mediterranean. In fact, a trip across the sea was not necessarily needed. For a variety of reasons, many of the monuments and burial items were preserved by museums and collectors across Europe.

That was much easier to access than Tibet which required crossing the Eurasian continent using the Silk Road or South America that required crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

That may have been part of the reason that it had become a treasure trove of breakthroughs for magicians who had hit a dead end and could take a quick overseas trip.

The Aeons of Isis, Osiris, and Horus.

When was it that the man who divided the world's chronology into those eras had crossed the sea and arrived in the desert?

When was it that he had experimented in summoning a great demon no one had ever heard of?

However, there was a certain brown goddess who would appear where she pleased, identify with people as she pleased, and weep for them as she pleased. And for once, she was laughing.

"Oh, dear. You don't hear those three names often these days."

It was a little too enchanting to call it a nostalgic smile.

That bewitching woman's smile contained some thorns and venom.

"As someone who joined them as a created divinity, I can only pray that the legends he knows have not been distorted from the originals."

Nephthys had no success or failure.

Nephthys had no fortune or misfortune.

Nephthys had no peace or trouble.

But if she ever saw someone fail before her eyes, a certain thought would reach her.

It was such a simple thought that she would forget about it as easily as it appeared in her mind.

She would want to weep for that person.

Just as she always did.

But was that enough?

Truly?

CHAPTER 4

Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru.

Attack_the_Fist.

Part 1

The situation was simple.

“Kamisato Kakeru is going to be here very soon.”

After returning to his dorm room, Kamijou Touma began with that announcement.

He no longer cared that the room was so cold. His extreme tension had overwhelmed his sense of temperature.

“He already knows where we are. His top priority is the Magic Gods, Othinus and Nephthys, but he also seems to have Birdway as a secondary opponent. Index and I are probably just in the way. To sum up, none of us are safe.”

And with that said...

“Birdway, are you hiding anything?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Kamisato said you are.”

“Oh, come on! You’re going to believe what the enemy tells you?”

“...”

He did not continue arguing.

Instead of glaring or yelling at her, he crouched down to her level and silently stared her right in the eye. After a while, she looked away awkwardly.

The cabal boss pouted her lips and answered with a look on her face she could never let her cabal or sister see.

“The cannibalization fruit will grow to completion in my body and it will entirely resolve the Sample Shoggoth parasite issue if my sister eats it. That isn’t a problem. There won’t be any strange side effects and I have no ulterior motive here.”

“Then what aren’t you telling us? Out with it.”

Birdway sighed and continued in a tone of complete resignation.

“The fruit is too big. By the time it’s complete, it might cause my body to burst from within. No, I take that back. It definitely will. I knew that since the design phase.”

“What!?”

“That’s why I didn’t want to tell you and why I couldn’t get my cabal’s help. If they knew their boss’s plan included a 100% chance of her death, they would have given up on Patricia and worked to preserve the organization. I’m not trying to brag, but for better or for worse, my death would be too influential. It would probably spread chaos throughout Europe. Listen, the human body is a treasure trove of secrets. There is no wasted space and the contents are packed in tight. Add in a completely new organ and it will naturally apply pressure from within, right?”

The fruit she had shown them had been in the center of her chest. That area was filled with her heart and a complex arrangement of major blood vessels. Whether it was inside or outside her ribs, it would still apply pressure. Even if her body did not actually burst open, pressure to a blood vessel like someone stepping on a hose could easily take her life.

“How were you even planning to get the completed fruit out?”

“I have a type of spiritual medicine prepared for that, so don’t worry. It can be pulled out without having to surgically open my body. I’m sure that grimoire library could give you an explanation on medicine men, but just like with rainmakers, this simply uses the a lot of what Westerns think of as African magic.”

But that did not solve the actual problem about her body bursting open.

It was unclear how much her sister Patricia knew, but what if she was rejecting the fruit because she wanted to stop its completion and not because she thought the artificial organ was too grotesque?

Did she at least understand her sister’s condition even if she did not know about magic?

“In that case, we can’t force you to do too much now.”

“Hey, human. Don’t forget about Nephthys’s problem. Despite her unnecessarily large body, she can’t move. Someone will have to carry her, which will slow us down. I can’t exactly do it with this body, you’re in charge of fighting, and the cabal girl is out too. I guess that leaves the Index Librorum Prohibitorum.”

They had plenty of people, but that was not a positive in this situation.

Kamijou and Index were the only two who could move properly and one of them would have to take care of Birdway and Nephthys. If Kamisato attacked in a group, the odds were good they would be unable to handle it.

More importantly, the room's lights suddenly went out.

"They're already here," muttered Kamijou in the darkness.

If the entire dorm building's power was out, it should have caused a commotion in the surrounding rooms, but there was no sign of that. The Kamisato Faction may have used some kind of trick like a people-clearing field.

That meant they would not be given a chance to think. Their enemy had fully switched their focus to defeating them while they could.

"We'll have to head out to meet them. We can't just sit here!!"

Part 2

As soon as the lights went out, Kamijou and the others were forced to move little by little.

They were on the receiving end of the attack and it was painfully obvious that they were going to be reacting more than acting.

Holing up in the room would accomplish little.

That plant girl named Claire had already attacked once. Her vines or whatever else could easily get in through the seventh-floor balcony. Locking the front door and pushing furniture against it would not last long either.

On top of it all, Kamisato Kakeru had his World Rejecter.

Its effects, conditions for use, and range were still unknown. They only knew it could instantly kill even Magic Gods. In the worst case, there was even a possibility it could cause the entire dorm building to collapse.

(We'll have to escape to the ground.)

"Index! Sorry, but you lend Nephthys your should-..."

He trailed off when he heard a disturbing sound. It did not come from the door, the window, or beyond the walls. Surprisingly, it came from within the room itself.

Birdway's head shot up.

"The duct!?"

Something large fell from above the gas range in the kitchen space. An amorphous blob reflected the faint light coming in from outside. It emitted a sticky light like glow-in-the-dark paint and it was covered in what could have been eyeballs or suckers. Trying to stare at it to perceive its silhouette only made it look like a deep-sea octopus, chopped up pieces of fat, or a film of rubber being melted from within. It was like viewing a flag for so long that each individual color stood out more than the overall meaning.

Different points wriggled, sharpened, and fired what looked like spears in every direction.

It was not Kamijou's Imagine Breaker that blocked it.

Birdway moved before he could. After a sound like a large cloth beating the air, her entire body was covered by something like a rotting red carpet.

"Birdway!!"

"This is no time to be picky! Ironically, the weakest ones here are the Magic Gods. You two take them with you. Your mind isn't up to enduring a death, is it!? Either way, this is perfect for me. My foolish sister ran away from home, got lost, and ended up in some guy's home, so I need to have a talk with her!!"

Sample Shoggoth.

That black mass was covered in glow-in-the-dark bubbles. It was supposedly Birdway's sister who had been attacked by a parasite from Antarctica and Kamisato Kakeru had supposedly taken her in.

(That bastard!!)

Kamijou desperately tried to keep his boiling head from exploding.

"We'll meet up later at the place we first met!!" he shouted.

"Oh? You certainly have learned how to make things sound romantic since I last saw you."

He placed Othinus on his own shoulder and had Index take Nephthys who was breathing heavily and could not stand steady. He did not like having the girl do physical labor, but he was their fighter and he needed to stay nimble for the coming battle.

He practically tackled the door open and ran out onto the seventh floor corridor.

Several flashlights and smartphone screens immediately shined light on him.

As best as he could tell...

(Three, four, five...no, there are more on the next building over, on the ground, and on the surrounding rooftops! And that's just what I can see. How many of them are hiding around here in all!?)

On top of that, no two of them were the same. In order to support Kamisato, they each had some kind of tricky, specialized supernatural power or technology.

If they all attacked at once, he would be unable to analyze them all and defend in time.

As he looked around, he shouted to Index.

"That fox girl!! Index, I know she's a magician at least!!"

"Understood, Touma. T R I A T O T T D Y B!! (That fox rain will avoid us and thus will soak your bodies!!)"

That was Spell Intercept.

Index could not refine magic power, so she could not use magic. But her empty and meaningless incantations could interfere with another's magic, create an intentional mistake, and take control of it.

And in Kamisato's introduction, he had said that fox-eared girl named Elza was a member of the magic side who used "something like a" Kokkuri to possess people and objects. She would bring the enemy to her side like shogi pieces and she could move those coins.

The busty delinquent girl gave a shout.

"Waaaah!? Wh-what the hell!!!???"

The plastic bottle she was cradling like a baby suddenly exploded.

The ten yen coins filling it scattered, but then stopped, altered their aim, and were fired with tremendous speed. They were not as fast as Misaka Mikoto's Railgun, but they applied enough pain to knock back one's limbs so they dropped their weapons.

These enemies did not need to be defeated.

They only needed to flinch for a brief moment.

"..."

Kamijou used that time to stare into the darkness and locate his true enemy.

That boy was their greatest fighter and also their Achilles' heel.

“Kamisatoooooo

(He doesn't actually touch whatever it is like I do. That wouldn't allow him to attack long range. Then is it anything he sees? Anything he points at? No, it isn't those either. If so, he wouldn't have caused a blackout before the attack. He would have wanted to increase his field of vision.)

So...

"The shadow."

He almost seemed to be whispering as his confident voice shot out to give the answer.

"You use the shadow cast by your arm to determine World Rejecter's effective range! That's why you wanted to shut down the lights before your attack!! That way you control the only light sources and you can freely determine the direction and size of your shadow!!"

The sense of time returned and their fall truly began.

As the threads of gravity grasped the two boys, Kamijou swung both arms to desperately grab the railing on the sixth floor, one floor below. He ignored the stinging pain in his shoulders and checked cautiously around. What had happened to Kamisato Kakeru?

"Not bad given the situation."

He was surprisingly close by.

There was another figure dangling from the sixth floor railing.

"I didn't expect the arrangement of one hundred pieces on the board to nearly collapse after you came into contact with only Elza and me."

While supporting himself with a single arm, Kamisato Kakeru smiled and gathered strength in his right hand.

He swung it.

"!!"

Kamijou immediately let go again.

He grabbed onto the fifth floor railing and this time crawled up onto the corridor.

"What are you trying to do, human!?"

"Once this confusion ends, their optimized layout will rush in toward Index and Nephthys. I'm also worried about Birdway back in my room with Patricia. We can't let them regain their calm. I need to stick with Kamisato and harass him as much as I can!!"

That left him with a single target.

He ran full speed down the corridor and to the emergency staircase leading upstairs.

The other boy must have been thinking the same thing because Kamijou ran into Kamisato Kakeru on the stairway landing at the halfway point.

“Damn you!!”

As Kamisato tried to run down the last step, Kamijou kicked at his ankle from the side, tripping him. Just as he had said, he was a normal high school boy save for World Rejecter. He fell onto the landing and Kamijou climbed on top of him.

Kamisato swung his right hand randomly a few times, but each time, Kamijou bent back and avoided that cruel and powerful attack.

He grabbed Kamisato’s wrist and swung his own head back.

“Pipe...dowwwwwn!!!!”

Kamijou’s forehead slammed into Kamisato’s. More due to having his brain shaken than the actual pain, Kamisato’s eyes rolled around in his head.

“...Kh...khah...!?”

He groaned and swung his body up to knock Kamijou off of him. Overwhelmed by the momentum, Kamijou rolled to the side and Kamisato began his counterattack. They switched between offense and defense again and again.

However, that did not last long.

After rolling a few times, Kamisato tried to climb on top again, but Kamijou bent one leg and placed the sole of his foot on Kamisato’s gut.

Then he extended his leg like a fully compressed spring.

Kamisato’s slender body was tossed into the air. This was the stairway landing, so he was thrown onto the stairs leading down.

“Ah.”

He was completely caught off guard and some dull sounds followed. Kamijou gasped for air as he got up and looked down the stairs where he saw someone collapsed like a broken doll.

When he saw the right hand still twitching, all restraint vanished within him.

He jumped down from the landing and stomped on that right hand. He pinned it to the floor.

“Why did you bring Patricia here?” he spat out. “You made the worst possible decision!! You went out of your way to set up a fight to the death between sisters! Did you think that was the most logical option? Were you stomping on their feelings to wear down our forces!?”

“...Shut up.”

Kamisato groaned from the ground with his right hand sealed.

“This is what she wanted!!”

A dull sound rang out. A pen in Kamisato’s hand had pierced through Kamijou’s shoe and into the top of his foot.

He was a normal high school boy through and through, but that did not mean he was powerless.

“!!”

Kamijou lost his balance due to the sudden pain. With the restraint on his right hand gone, Kamisato rolled to the side. After escaping danger, he kicked the pen that was still stabbed into Kamijou’s foot.

“Gaaah!!”

This time, Kamijou collapsed.

The two boys began grappling again.

Nothing else mattered. Kamijou poured all his focus on Kamisato’s right wrist. World Rejecter was activated from its shadow, so even if he grabbed it, there would be a shadow that could blow him away.

It was just like dealing with a knife.

Instead of trying to grab the blade, one had to grab the enemy’s wrist to alter its trajectory or keep it from moving.

Kamisato spoke from close range.

“I’m sure you at least understand the situation now. If one of those sisters is saved, the other will die. There’s no time left. We can’t put off making a decision.”

“Then whose side are you on? It looks like you’re siding with Patricia, but helping her defeat Birdway will only crush the fruit needed to save her!”

“Yes, that is salvation.”

This was an exchange of extreme irregulars, of joker-like right hands.

As the battle continued, Kamisato Kakeru gave an incomprehensible answer.

No...

“Patricia’s explanation isn’t enough to know what exactly her sister Leivinia is trying to do, but I do know that a definite limit is approaching. Meanwhile, the Sample Shoggoth living in Patricia’s body may be harmful, but it has no set limit.”

“What are you-... Wait, you can’t mean...!”

“If Sample Shoggoth is not removed, Patricia will *immediately* die. ...Who ever said that? I think you have the initial conditions wrong.”

Kamisato Kakeru thrust his words at Kamijou with no readable emotion in his eyes.

“And as long as Patricia’s death is off the table, her sister Leivinia loses her reason for being here. The one sister does not have to risk her life if the other tries to coexist with the parasite. At the very least, it frees them from these insane scales that require one of them to lose their life. So we are trying to destroy the thing living inside Leivinia’s chest. That will save both sisters.”

“Do you really understand what you’re saying? That parasite dissolved all of her body’s fat and lives in the empty space that created! Do you know what it would mean to live with that for the rest of her life!?”

“Parasites have a variety of reasons to kill their host, but most of those do it to more easily reach their next host. Sample Shoggoth is being researched by Ellen and Fran – who was supposedly made into a Gemstone by an implant from a UFO, although I don’t know how much of that is true. We will know more details before long. From there, we only need to learn how to control its actions. Forcibly restraining it might cause it to go on a rampage inside her, but not if we spoil it by giving it something it wants. It’s just like raising a cat. Training it might be impossible, but you can cover the power cables you don’t want it playing with and you can scatter food to distract it if it does something you don’t want. That gives us a starting point to controlling it.”

That lifeform devoured one’s flesh to create a home.

It looked like a deep-sea octopus, chopped-up fat, or a rubber film being melted from within. She would have to live with it for one hundred years, constantly keeping it satisfied and never able to direct her anger at it.

Kamijou only thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

“That wouldn’t work. Patricia would lose all control. And if Sample Shoggoth really is the type to kill its old host in search of a new host, it would only be using her! Even if we isolated her deep in the mountains, it could easily control her body to bring her to civilization!! And then she would die as it switched hosts!!”

“Yes, it isn’t rare for parasites to control their host’s body or thoughts, so that would only be stage one. The current problem is eliminating the possibility of Patricia’s immediate death, but once that is dealt with, we could find a way to remove it from her body. For example, the parasite would kill her because it robbed her of all the fat that stores nutrients. That puts her in a situation where she would die without Sample Shoggoth, but we only have to remove that initial condition.”

“What?”

“Even without those stored nutrients, she can be given a constant IV of nutrients. Her blood can be circulated through an external dialysis machine where nutrients are added into her blood. There are ways. Patricia herself suggested a few and Ellen has begun drawing up actual plans.”

That would be a life hooked up to machines and tubes because all of her fat had been removed.

She would lose her human contours and silhouette.

Kamijou only thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

“She would never be able to get up on her own again. She would truly be nothing but skin and bones. Her hair and skin would be so dried out that they would peel away. She wouldn’t just be bedridden. All of her joints would dry out and solidify, so she couldn’t move. Yet if they were crushed from the outside, something would ooze out. She’d be just like a chrysalis! All she would have is her life and she’d only not be alive in a medical sense. Isn’t there any other way!?”

“Yes, a normal human would give up. An unavoidable destiny is one thing, but no one would choose to abandon their working body. They might say they would, but they would have a change of heart somewhere. But Patricia didn’t. She doesn’t want her sister to die and she doesn’t want to leave her sister with the stigma of letting a family member die. So instead of choosing one or the other, she tried to create a third option that would save both their lives! Even if all it saves is her life!! She drew a line there and gave up on everything else!!”

“…”

“I respect that courage. I respect that small sense of righteousness that allowed her to face the pain without running away and to accept the fear without giving up. So I’m sick of

meaningless talk of good or evil. I don't care who looks down on me or criticizes me. I won't leave Patricia all alone. Her heart was powerful enough to deflect my World Rejecter, so I'll support her to the end."

Because he had approved of it and because he had accepted how she felt, he was telling the formal textbook to shove it.

It was entirely subjective, it asked nothing of anyone but that girl, and it did not try to understand anyone else. Was that the kind of conclusion he was backing?

"But you have to be wrong. The rails shifted at some point. I don't know what happened between you and Patricia, but I'm sure something did. Is this really what she wanted in the very, very beginning, when she tearfully asked you for help and clung to your hand? Did you compromise somewhere!? Did you only later decide *that this was the one and only best answer*!?"

"You know what?"

There was no obvious emotion in Kamisato's calm voice, but something oozed out from the depths.

"I've wondered and wondered why I wasn't the very first one to be destroyed by World Rejecter. After all, I hesitate so much and I can't get my desires sorted out. But I think the reason I'm still here is because my hatred for the Magic Gods overpowered any desire to return to my lost days or to abandon this power I was given. I save people and get along with Ellen and the others in order to get back at the insane Magic Gods. In other words, it's part of my revenge. I opposed those conflicting negative thoughts with a single negative thought of my own. So I respect Patricia for facing such unreasonable circumstances and yet taking the first step toward what little hope she could find instead of wishing for a new world or hating the current world. She chose to climb to the stage above me, so I won't let anyone get in her way. *She is my hero.*"

He could not do it.

He had been unable to do it.

After all of his decisions, only dark violence had remained. But unlike him, Patricia had continued thinking of her sister to the end. She had never wavered or been conflicted.

He respected that.

But...

"You're satisfied with heroically driving a tearful girl into a corner? You drive her to the edge of the cliff and then praise her for having the courage to jump!? That's wrong! Simply becoming a hero isn't some wonderful thing! Not when you're throwing your life away like that! Fighting against the urge to lower the value of a life is an amazing strength! It's far,

far, far more admirable than useless people like us who can only wave our right hands around to fight!! It has to be!!"

Whenever an intense battle ended, he was scolded by Index, Misaka Mikoto, or someone else.

He had a special right arm, but the world did not press him to keep fighting and fighting.

That was true kindness.

If that kindness was taken away, the world truly would be over. A cruel and coldhearted digital system would take over where the fate of people's lives was decided simply by comparing the parameters.

That was Kamisato's ideal that surpassed simple good or evil.

If someone had a special power or special circumstances, did that alone mean they were forced to risk their life and fight? Were they to forget the path they had walked thus far, cast aside everything precious to them, and charge toward death like a clockwork doll?

If Kamijou found a girl troubled by those thoughts, he would have no choice but to unconditionally tell her she was wrong.

That was another form of righteousness.

But this opponent he could not easily reach sent mocking words his way.

"Then what are you going to do? Save both sisters or refuse to give up on either one? You're the kind of fool that never manages to make a decision and loses both of them. You're a nothing with a different obsession than mine. You're just a hypocrite who protects your own humanity by sobbing that there was no other option after you lose everything. Don't make me laugh, Kamijou Touma. You choose nothing, abandon nothing, and take on none of the burden. I don't want to hear someone like that lecture me on salvation. As long as you continue to support Leivina's plan, you stand on the side of taking a life *to give this a nice clean ending*."

"Even if..."

Kamijou Touma clenched his teeth, stared at his enemy, and shouted back from the bottom of his gut.

"Even if that's true, I still have to say it!! If a girl is standing before me asking for help, I have to give her that ideal answer or it's all over!! I have to tell her that I won't let anyone be lost, that I won't leave anyone in a world of fear and suffering, and that I'll make sure everyone can smile together in the end!!"

For just a second, Kamisato almost seemed to choke, but then anger and hatred filled his eyes.

World Rejecter was making a comeback.

“Are you trying to put off making a decision or do you just not want to make it yourself? You don’t have any way of doing that. If you say that, you’ll end up losing both of them.”

“That’s right!! I’m not a genius with an IQ of 200! I’m not the Index Librorum Prohibitorum that’s memorized 103,000 grimoires or a Magic God that can remake the entire world!! But that doesn’t mean I can give up just because someone tells me to. Like the idiot I am, I’ll keep struggling to find a hint until I actually find one. I’ll ask Index or Othinus for help, I’ll ask Birdway or Nephthys if they know anything, and I’ll use everything available to me! I don’t care about pride and there’s no rule saying I have to do everything on my own!!”

“Hah. So you’re just leaving it to someone else? Is that another line of defense? If something goes wrong and you lose everything, you can just say you were only doing what your mommy told you?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’ll use everything available to me. Someone’s life is on the line! There’s no time to keep up appearances!! So I’ll use it!! Your method forces us to watch Patricia living a bedridden life as a chrysalis while we try to convince ourselves this was the best option even as a shadow hangs over our smiles! You can call it pathetic, unsightly, or backwards if you want! But I’m not going to become some self-absorbed asshole who acts cool by calmly giving up too easily and then tries to show off how he made the painful decision no one else could!! You don’t get to decide what salvation is, Kamisato!!”

After all, Kamijou knew something.

Where did evil come from? Good was not good because someone decided it was and evil was not evil because it said so in some book. When someone gave up on someone else and cut them off, that was when that second person became evil. It happened when the possibility of salvation was taken from them, they were left with no connection to anyone else, and everyone assumed they were a lost cause.

It had happened to the High Priest.

Kamijou had done it to him.

It was possible they could have reconciled their differences like he had with Othinus. It was possible they could have talked it out like he had with Nephthys. But he had been so influenced by the High Priest’s appearance, history, and violence that he had entirely forgotten about that option. *He had unilaterally defined him as something to be defeated.*

He was not going to let that happen again.

He did not think the High Priest had been a good person. He also thought that conclusion had been the best one possible. But those things were a different issue entirely. He did not want to receive or give that kind of pain again. He never again wanted to witness someone being made evil.

So...

"I will save them, Kamisato."

"?"

"I will save both Leivinia and Patricia. They may both want to sacrifice themselves for the other! They may be willing to accept the pain and fear of being skin and bones hooked up to a machine! But I'll destroy all of that and ruin all of that to save everyone and everything!! No matter what happens, I will not *cut off* the Birdway sisters as a lost cause!!"

"What...are you talking about?"

"This is what it means to be a hero. This is what it means to be a normal high school boy! This is what we say at times like this. An actual method or real odds of success don't matter. Even if we have no idea what we can do and we've reached a dead-end, we still have to make sure everything works out in the end!! Isn't that perfectly normal? Why should I have to explain why I would want to save everyone, keep everyone from dying, and not leave anyone behind in a world of fear and suffering!!!?"

"Again, how will you do it?" Kamisato gave his mocking reply catching his breath. "The growth of Leivinia's fruit will cause her to burst from within and forcibly removing Sample Shoggoth from Patricia will kill her. You can only save one or the other. You can't save both. The only way to save both is to find an external way to supply Patricia with nutrients instead of relying on her body's fat, no matter what changes the process will make to her body. Or are you saying you know someone with an even more useful supernatural power?"

"Didn't I tell you? I don't care if you call it pathetic, unsightly, or backwards." Kamijou answered with a relaxed smile. "According to Birdway, the parasite dissolved Patricia's fat and slipped into that empty space. Since it's handling the storage and distribution of nutrients, she'll die from lack of nutrients if it's forcibly removed. And that fruit is needed to safely drive it out without killing her."

"So what? Why would you repeat the hopeless situation?"

"It's important. Checking back over the initial conditions is important, *rookie*. And if those are our conditions, then this is simple. We just have to fill Patricia's body with fat to take the place of that thing. And I'm not talking about an IV or dialysis. I'm simply talking about returning her to normal by giving her the fat she's lost. If we use the fat to drive out the parasite like a game of musical chairs, Patricia won't be left as skin and bones after the monster's gone! If the new fat supplies her with the nutrients she needs, she

won't die!! We might be able to save her without the fruit!! And without her turning into a bedridden chrysalis!!"

"Thanks for the speech, but do you see a convenient tool like that lying around? Don't tell me actually think you can suck out your fat like a liposuction diet and pump it into Patricia to solve this."

"You already know the solution."

This time, Kamisato Kakeru came to a complete stop.

For a brief moment, he completely forgot to fight his enemy.

"What?"

"You know someone who's more like a plant than an animal, right? You know someone can use bonds and whatever else to absorb the traits of any kind of matter, right?"

And...

And...

And...

"Did you forget that fat doesn't necessarily come from animals!? There are plenty of plant fats like canola oil or margarine!!"

Kamisato Kakeru's assumptions, perceptions, and thoughts vanished.

His problems and hardships vanished.

He even forgot to breathe.

Meanwhile, Kamijou continued speaking.

"Of course, just stuffing margarine inside someone's body won't supply them with nutrients. Things aren't that convenient."

The fruit growing in Birdway's chest was apparently made of corn starch.

The substance had originally been used in threads or sheets to sew up or cover wounds. Once affixed to the patient, they would naturally break down and fuse with the surrounding tissue to smoothly close the wound without needing to be removed later. In other words, the body would not reject it under the right circumstances.

"But your comrade is different, isn't she? You said that gardening club member named Claire is a Gemstone and her body is almost entirely like a plant. That means we only need

her help. She can use her own body as an example to make some plant fat that the human body will accept. Then she only has to pump it into Patricia! That will solve everything without having to sacrifice anyone!!"

"..."

"So I'll say it. I'll shamelessly take what belonged to someone else and show it off like it's mine. If you had just spoken to her yourself, you could have saved both the Birdway sisters!! And without the fear and suffering of becoming a bedridden chrysalis! But you tried to act cool, acted like tragedy was a virtue, and readily gave up on them without bothering to worry over it to a pathetic extent! How are you a hero? What salvation is there in anything you've done here!? You idiot!!!!!"

Kamisato was caught off guard.

The righteousness he had believed in had been rejected and his very existence was being mocked.

"I have no proof this will work."

Kamijou spat out those words.

He did not avoid looking at his own flaws.

"Neither of us has any proof that our plan will save them. We're both awful people for resting the lives of those sisters on our amateur opinions! But if I have a choice, I'll go with my plan. Even if yours worked, there would be no smiles. If the odds are even, of course I'll choose the one that lets us smile afterwards!!"

Kamisato could not argue back. He could not move his right hand. He had realized that, in this situation, he could not provide an answer better than the one Kamijou Touma had.

At that moment, a sticky noise reached them.

They looked over and saw red and black amorphous creatures clinging to the wall of the neighboring building. One was an animal skin that looked like a rotting carpet and the other was an Antarctic parasite that dissolved a human's fat and slipped into the empty space. Now that they had an answer, those beloved sisters no longer needed to fight to the death.

"Those morons have been swept away by the atmosphere here!!"

Kamijou moved his aching body to slowly stand back up.

Kamisato looked up at him from the floor.

“What are you going to do? They’re clinging to the wall pretty high up. That’s not in range of your right hand.”

“Let me ask you something instead. What do you want to do?” spat back Kamijou. “You said before that you didn’t gain that power because you wanted to and that you aren’t doing this because you want to. If you can stand here, look at those sisters, and still say that, then you can sit there on your pathetic little ass. I’ll go take care of everything.”

“...”

“But if...”

He paused for a beat and made a reversal.

“If you look at those two! If you look at those girls crawling down the path of ridiculous tragedy and needless sacrifice!! And you feel anything at all, then come with me. Listen, rookie. *The kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere is someone who can become a hero at any time if they happen to see someone in need!!!!!*”

That was completely normal.

Everyone felt the desire to save someone.

But if they did not even try because they had decided they could not, then they were even lower than average.

That was what a loser did.

It was the thought process of someone without any balls.

So if they did not want to be called those names, they had to stand up.

It did not matter if they were afraid, if their legs were shaking, if their teeth were chattering, or their mind had gone blank.

Being normal or being average was not a simple thing. It was not easy. Doing nothing was not “normal”. A lot of effort went into keeping that title, even if it went unnoticed. Slacking off even a little bit in that effort would cause one to stray from the path of being “normal”.

So...

“Show me what being ‘normal’ is to you.”

Kamijou Touma, the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere, spoke.

“Show me just how beautiful the ‘normal’ world you want is!!”

Part 3

One sister thought to herself.

(I've finally made it in time. I caught up to her before the fruit inside me rots away. Now I just have to wait for it to bear fruit. It may crush my heart and lungs, but I can save my sister!!)

The other sister silently spoke her desire.

(I still have a way to save her. It was my fault Sample Shoggoth got inside me, so it isn't her responsibility. I'll crush and remove that fruit before it reaches completion. I can save her by refusing my ticket home!!)

They both made sticky sounds as they clung to the wall as a rotten red carpet or a black monster that's form grew more incoherent the more one observed it. Their desire to save someone so important to them was not a filthy thing.

But that was exactly why they would not stop. The brighter the light of good behind their actions, the further they distanced themselves from compromise. When walking down the path of evil, most people would grow exhausted, be worn down, and end up stopping. But most people would feel no pain from acts of good.

Good was more powerful than evil.

That also meant it was easier to be swept away by good.

And so...

"...!!"

"_____!?"

Multiple great rumbling sounds followed one after another.

The red and black monsters tried to devour each other while still clinging to the vertical wall.

Even in a clash between family members who shared the same blood, they did not hold back. They would not have been able to wield violence to strike the other, to make them cry, or to injure them, but they could wield any amount of violence if it was to save them.

It was such a cruel scene that it almost seemed comical.

But Kamijou Touma's Imagine Breaker smashed that sickening tragedy to pieces.

How had he touched the Birdway sisters as they clung to that wall at such a height?

The answer was incredibly simple.

He had run to the roof of the building and jumped right off.

"Oh, ohh, ohhhh

The black mass immediately burst. It must have lost the strength to cling to the wall because Patricia's small body was thrown into a freefall.

The red carpet started after her but then came to an unnatural stop. The boy glimpsed a human will there and assumed it was a sign of trust.

Kamijou extended his right hand, grabbed the falling girl's arm, and pulled her in.

He held her in his arms as they continued to fall.

"It's going to be okay."

His whispered words were not directed at Patricia alone.

Kamijou Touma was speaking to both souls he held in his arms.

He did not care if it was hypocritical or self-righteous. He did not care if he gave no thought to his capabilities or physical abilities. At a time like this, there were some things he simply had to say. If he was faced with a worn-down girl who had even forgotten to cry as she believed giving up on her own life was the best option, there were some words he simply had to speak.

"That ridiculous illusion is over now. I'll destroy it here and now!!"

Their bodies did not crash into the asphalt.

Crisscrossing plant vines shot out near the ground, creating a giant net that easily caught them.

He did not feel like messing with crawling out of it, so he tore the plant net to pieces with Imagine Breaker.

The plant girl named Claire waited below in her shoulder-exposing white dress.

"Please take care of this!!"

"Oh, honestly, why am I so nice!? Why do I have to go all out to protect someone other than Kamisato-san!?"

Kamijou placed Patricia face-up on the road and the girl peered down at her through her large round glasses. They did not have much time. They could not predict how Sample Shoggoth would react inside Patricia's body.

First of all, root-like strands thinner than threads slipped inside the pores all across Patricia's body.

The glasses girl seemed to be searching for something as she shut her eyes and whispered.

“One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Applicable locations confirmed. Preparation for creation, shaping, and injection of plant fat complete.”

She opened her eyes and a mechanical sound followed.

Claire’s fingernails grew over a meter long. The cream-colored blades quickly stabbed into locations across Patricia’s body. The action produced pleasant sounds much like a metal skewer stabbing into a mass of kneaded dough. The locations ranged from Patricia’s face, arms, legs, and lower stomach, but once the fingernails stopped something’s movement, she started moving in displeasure. The transformation was obvious even through her thick down jacket. Something flowed through her as if following the paths of eight legs and it gathered at the center of her flat chest. A fist-sized mass wriggled below her skin.

Her small body gave a jerk, but she did not seem to be bleeding anywhere.

“Please crush it wherever it comes out! Be thorough, to make sure it doesn’t search for a new host!!”

It was like squeezing out pus.

Starting at the eight flowing routes that did not reach the center of her chest, Patricia’s soft skin split apart and a creepily bubbling black thing seeped out. Before it could do anything, Kamijou pressed Imagine Breaker against it as if wiping it away with his finger.

Each time, something vanished and the mass at the center of her chest grew smaller. Kamijou had no accurate knowledge of this sort of thing, but this gave him an instinctual understanding of their progress.

Things were going well.

Patricia’s body was not flattening out like a juice box having the air forcibly sucked out through a straw. Before that could happen, Claire’s plant fat filled the gaps and prevented the girl from losing her nutrients.

But at the same time, Claire was using all ten fingers to influence Patricia’s body at once. Sample Shoggoth seemed to be freely swimming below Patricia’s skin, but it had apparently just dissolved her fat and slipped into the empty space. So it may have been divided into a number of “rooms” as it lived inside her. As it was forced out and the gaps were filled, it was losing its living space. The mass at the center of her chest was large and creepy, but that did not mean it had an advantage. In fact, the area at the chest was the final “room” it had been chased into.

That meant they could not predict what it would do next.

After a dull sound, Patricia’s down jacket undulated unnaturally from within.

Something like black fangs bit down on Claire's long fingernails and kept them from moving.

"What? Did it mistake my fingernails for part of its host since they're inside the girl's body?"

Claire's hands were trapped and she even seemed to be dragged toward Patricia.

She looked around in search of any way to escape this situation, but then her head came to a stop.

Kamijou realized why.

Directly behind her, the ground broke apart and black tentacles burst out.

They had likely left Patricia's back and eaten through the ground, despite all the dirt and grass in the way.

"No, this isn't just about plants like me. It's devouring everything it can to test every possibility! Just like a trapped insect jumping into a river or a fish jumping from the water!"

Kamijou immediately raised his right hand to shield the defenseless plant girl.

"You-!"

You can't.

Before she had even finished her shout, Kamijou had realized his own carelessness.

She had told him to crush whatever came out of Patricia, so how dangerous would this unexpected situation be?

That thing had used that fact as a shield.

He had crushed the black mass with Imagine Breaker a few times already, but this was different. He would be interfering with the surgery. If Claire's pace was thrown off, they could not predict what would happen to Patricia. Sample Shoggoth might destroy her body more than expected and cause her to rapidly decline or it might mess with Claire's fingernails inside Patricia's body.

In other words, intercepting with his right hand could cause a violent enough shock to kill Patricia, but ignoring it would let the black avalanche reach them all. And if it moved to a new host, it was unlikely to care what happened to the old one.

Would he act or not?

Both options would lead to Patricia's death.

And it was already too late.

He had already shifted from thought to action.

"Damn...it..."

He tried to slam on the brakes for his muscles, but it did not work. His right hand collided with the black avalanche.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

The destruction began.

Part 4

Meanwhile, Index felt a weight leave her shoulder as she watched from the corridor on a higher floor. The intermittent warm breaths on her cheek also vanished.

"?"

She turned in confusion toward the person she had been supporting on her shoulder.

That person was Nephthys, one of the Magic Gods. Her existence itself was hard to believe, but based on what Index had heard, more than 99% of her body had been exiled to another world by Kamisato Kakeru's World Rejecter.

"*Would this be the time?*"

The brown beauty smiled with beads of sweat visible on her forehead.

No one would have known, but those were the same words spoken by the Magic God known as the High Priest as he watched Othinus break apart in Denmark.

If categorized as good or evil, the High Priest had definitely been evil, but even he had saved something as one of the gods.

"I had thought a miracle might occur, but I guess I can't escape destruction. Then again, it was strange for a god to be relying on a miracle in the first place."

"What are you-...?"

“Please tell Kamijou Touma the details of what is about to happen. He seems like he would have difficulty accepting the death of someone close to him. Tell him I was already dead and my body was kept moving by something like residual body heat. Tell him I stopped moving because the time had come and not because he did anything wrong.”

Nephthys moved away.

Or so it initially seemed to Index, but that was inaccurate. That Magic God no longer had the strength left to move her legs. The weight was vanishing because her very existence was fading.

The brown beauty’s outline dried and dispersed like an image of sand.

Finally, only her enchanting voice remained.

“That’s right. I am a god. I’m not supposed to hope for a miracle; I’m supposed to be the one causing the miracles.”

“Nephthys!!”

Index cried out, but that was not going to accomplish anything.

Even if the woman had been weakened, she was still a true god. The knowledge of 103,000 grimoires was not enough to obstruct her magic.

Her voice and presence disappeared. A small sandstorm passed over the railing and rushed toward the ground. It rushed toward Patricia Birdway whose tragedy was approaching completion as she was forced into a weakened death after the parasite was killed more violently than necessary.

She was Nephthys, a goddess passed own in Egyptian mythology. She had no real legends outside of crying at the funeral of a great god and some said her divinity was created around the idea of the crying woman.

She did not have a background or history of her own. She was a gathering of the thousands and tens of thousands of servants buried in the pyramid along with the human pharaoh. She should have had no interest in the outside world or the people who lived there. She could not search out an individual with a close relationship to her. After all, she herself had no concept of individuality. And as a group’s shared consciousness, she had no intention of getting along with the descendants of those who had silently forced that group to be buried with the pharaoh.

However...

(I should have wondered why.)

When Kamisato Kakeru had attacked her with World Rejecter and over 99% of her body had been torn away, she had honestly not wanted to die. She had not wanted to travel down the same unknown path as Niang-Niang. But why not? Was it due to the fear? If so, where did that fear come from? Was it fear of having her existence erased or simply of the pain? But as previously stated, she was a group of servants closed inside the pyramid with the pharaoh. She had been so thoroughly twisted from her very origin that she no longer had it in her to fear simple violence.

Then what was that fear?

(Yes. I...)

If categorized as good or evil, Nephthys would have been an evil god.

From the viewpoint of human society, at least.

After the High Priest's defeat, she had not tried to stop Niang-Niang when the other Magic God had announced she would destroy Academy City. That fact did not change.

But...

Even if it contradicted her previous actions and stood at odds with everything else about her, a certain thought had reached her mind when Kamisato Kakeru had attacked.

(I still wanted to do something godlike.)

Nephthys's sandstorm-like structure changed on the microscopic level. Her body was a collection of the dust that mummies became as they vanished into the flow of time. There were no traces left that could point to any individual person, but they were still the parts that had made up human bodies.

With that, she had everything necessary.

She had everything necessary for Patricia whose life was vanishing as Sample Shoggoth was rapidly annihilated. In other words, she had the replacement fat. But unlike the plant girl's fat, Nephthys became actual animal fat, so she could slip into Patricia's body with no risk of rejection.

So she remade all of herself.

She became a part of Patricia Birdway.

In the rewriting process, her existence as Nephthys would vanish. It was a lot like erasing the data on a hard disk and filling it with new data that prevented the old data from being recovered.

In that way, Nephthys would die here.

But strangely enough, she felt no fear.

The feeling that had overwhelmed her during Kamisato Kakeru's attack was not here. But that was not because she was taking the logical view that more than 99% of her body had been exiled to another world and thus her "main" consciousness would remain somewhere else even if this tiny portion died.

Her previous guess must have been correct.

This time, she was not vanishing before she could accomplish something, so she did not feel the fear she had when Kamisato's hand had been unilaterally exiling her.

If she had still had a face, she knew she would have been smiling.

A moment later, it was all over.

The Egyptian goddess reached the girl who stood on the brink of death.

"Kah...!?"

Patricia's entire body shook.

She had been rapidly losing volume and transforming into a dried mummy, but she returned to normal as if swelling out from within. A glossy sheen returned to her skin and hair. The girl had returned to being a mere girl.

The last traces of Nephthys vanished and only Patricia's natural body remained.

For a while, Patricia seemed trapped by a dreamlike illusion as she wandered in the gap between life and death. Her widened eyes stared into empty space.

As her mind sat in an illusionary world, she spoke the question that came to mind.

"Who...are you?"

Kamijou Touma and Claire did not see what she saw.

The response did not actually reach her by vibrating the air and her eardrums.

Nevertheless, Patricia Birdway clearly heard that woman's voice.

"If you have to call me something, I guess you could call me a god."

Part 5

It was all over.

With the Antarctic parasite inside Patricia Birdway's body dealt with, the threat of the apple inside Leivinia Birdway's body was also resolved. For a while, Birdway seemed unable to believe the miracle that had descended on them, but after checking over her unconscious sister's body, she had no choice but to accept it. She did not give any verbal thanks, but pulling out and throwing away the strange artificial organ in her chest was proof enough.

There was apparently some ominous group known as the Kamisato Faction, but Kamisato Kakeru himself showed no further attachment to Patricia. Had he intended it that way from the beginning, or was it out of respect for Kamijou's intervention? Based on what he had said, it was also possible he simply did not want his faction to grow if he could avoid it.

Also, Magic God Nephthys had vanished.

Despite all of his bragging, Kamijou had ultimately allowed a sacrifice.

"..."

There had been nothing he could have done.

A bitter feeling spread through his chest, but he could not stand still now.

“Well?”

He looked around again.

Normal High School Boy Kamisato Kakeru waited for him, surrounded by a great number of girls.

“What are you going to do? This isn’t over yet, is it?”

“No, it isn’t.”

Patricia’s incident had been a detour for Kamisato. He had stumbled across her while dealing with the Magic Gods and Imagine Breaker. Due to his nature, he had simply been unable to ignore the life at risk before his eyes.

Now that he was freed from that, he would return to his main task.

Nephthys was gone, but the final Magic God remained: Othinus.

“I have one question for you,” said Kamisato. “Quite a few Magic Gods were closely involved in the creation of my World Rejecter and your Imagine Breaker. They are also the root cause of the strange environment surrounding us and the many incidents we find ourselves caught up in, so you could call them *the reason we are no longer normal*. ...Don’t you think we have a right to take revenge?”

“If...”

Kamijou did not hesitate either.

With Othinus, he had been knocked around so much his brain was nearly fried. With the High Priest, he had been driven by fear and lost sight of his opponent’s nature. But with Nephthys, something had changed. He no longer needed to question anything.

“If you can call them ‘nothing but’ evil after seeing Nephthys’s end, then you really are my enemy, Kamisato. You look evil to me. So much so that I feel an urge to cut you off.”

“...”

Just once, Kamisato Kakeru narrowed his eyes with a hand on the side of his neck.

He may have had his thoughts on that. In fact, the look on his face made it clear he wished he had not seen that.

He took a single step forward and all the girls around him slowly moved away.

In response, Kamijou left fifteen centimeter Othinus with Index. Realizing what he wanted them to do, the silver-haired nun and Birdway backed away while the latter held her limp sister.

As the two boys slowly approached each other, their surroundings disappeared.

At some point, they became all that remained in the darkness of the night.

Like the opposite poles of a magnet being pulled together, Imagine Breaker and World Rejecter naturally walked toward each other.

They stopped at several meters apart.

If they took another step and raised their fists, they would be in range of each other's faces. Kamisato removed his palm from the side of his neck. He slowly closed and opened that hand. That ultimate weapon could tear through even a Magic God.

Kamijou Touma and Kamisato Kakeru's gazes clashed.

"Before even thinking about this strange bond, I was simply curious."

"..."

"My World Rejecter and your Imagine Breaker are the ultimate weapon and the ultimate shield. If the world's two most extreme irregulars clash, which one will win?"

"It might not be that big a deal."

"Really? I'm actually a little worried that it might cause something like an antimatter reaction."

Great strength filled both fists.

"No tricks this time."

"Right."

The unreliable illumination from the streetlights suddenly vanished.

Complete darkness fell.

And in that darkness, something happened.

A deafening noise rang out.

Today's Hotpot Party, Ingredients List 5

Soy sauce. Miso.

~~Chicken breast, daikon, bok choy, cabbage, bean sprouts, shirataki, tofu.~~

~~Bouillon, salt, sugar, pepper, champon noodles~~

~~Bargain vanilla ice cream, canned yellow peaches, canned pineapple, canned mandarin oranges. (For dessert)~~

~~Fish sausage.~~

~~Cannibalization Fruit (Made by Leivinia Birdway, rare item)~~

Sample Shoggoth (Remants)

Princess's Animal Skin (Remants)

(Quick Memo)

Kamijou Touma: "Sigh. So we've settled on this bizarre hotpot, have we?"

Othinus: "Hey, those things are still twitching even after being torn to shreds. And isn't one of them a parasite?"

Birdway: "Just think of it as filled with the extract of two sisters, and it sounds like a rare delicacy."

EPILOGUE

The Time for the Cradle Comes to an End.

More_Purely,More_Bloody.

Kamisato Kakeru walked through District 7 at night.

He was speaking with someone over his cellphone.

“Ah ha ha! Single combat with the rumored Imagine Breaker, huh? Bet you had fun for the first time in a while, didn’t you? Your power’s so ridiculous that you rarely get to move on to a second strike.”

“I don’t really like fighting that much...”

“But I’m surprised you got your bodyguards to back off. All of them would be willing to bury a body or two in the mountains for you.”

“...”

The girl on the phone was not trying to make it sound creepy.

She sounded like she thought that was perfectly normal. She made it sound as casual as having a childhood friend prepare a lunch for you even though you did not ask.

This was now Kamisato Kakeru’s everyday life.

Something had veered him off course.

He still believed it was his right hand’s fault.

“Well?”

“Yes?”

“So who won the fight? Your World Rejecter or his Imagine Breaker? That’s something not even my forensic investigation skills can predict.”

“Oh, that.”

Kamisato breathed a gentle sigh in the darkness.

“*Imagine Breaker didn’t amount to much.*”

That was a certain resolution.

Those words answered which of those powers had the upper hand.

“Well, that’s pretty much what I expected.” Ellen did not seem surprised. “And that’s what makes it so boring.”

Her lack of surprise did not come from a careful comparison of both sides. It came from her blind belief in Kamisato’s strength. God could not lose, justice could not lose, and a hero could not lose. Her thoughts were based on that sort of assumption.

“But...”

And that was why she would never have expected what he said next.

“Who would have thought there was something else *inside* Imagine Breaker?”

Bright headlights shined on Kamisato Kakeru.

In the instant of illumination, blood could be seen soaking his entire body. His coat was torn randomly and one of his arms hung limply at his side. He could no longer hold a hand to the side of his neck. One of his eyes would not open.

“When it was just Imagine Breaker, it was easy. But as soon as I erased it, *that* shot out.”

“Eh? Wait...”

“What was that thing? Kamijou Touma isn’t just the owner of Imagine Breaker... Yes...”

“What is that heavy tone for? Eh? You’re joking right? Please wait just a minute!!”

Static filled the phone call.

Kamisato removed it from his ear and folded it in two to close it. He stuck the electronic device in his pocket and faced forward where something waited for him.

It looked like a large dog.

The golden retriever spoke human language.

“Do you understand what it means for me to be here?”

Instead of immediately answering, Kamisato brought a hand to his mouth.

A sticky sound followed.

He stopped what came spewing from his mouth, but something dark red still dripped from his nose.

He forcibly swallowed the rusty-smelling mass in his throat to clear his windpipe.

Finally, he opened his mouth.

“...Kh. Are you this city’s grim reaper?”

The golden retriever neither confirmed nor denied the possibility.

He may not have sensed any romance in the way the boy put it.

“To be honest, a Kihara such as myself has no interest in good or evil. But you have caused too much trouble. You have trespassed on someone’s yard and started eating all of the fruits growing in their garden. Sorry, but between like and dislike, that would fall under dislike.”

Something incredibly large and heavy flew down from the night sky.

It almost looked like a hammer swung by a giant. Also, it did more than spread indiscriminate violence. It followed some set of coldhearted laws like a judge giving an absolute death sentence.

Countless metal containers stabbed into the asphalt one after another. They opened up like dice unfolding into a two-dimensional diagram, revealing a great variety of weaponry. They arranged themselves around the golden retriever and quickly connected to him.

“This was not meant to be used on someone like you.”

A slender arm unrelated to the weaponry placed a cigar in his mouth as he spoke.

“Hey, have you ever heard of the Anti-Art Attachment?”

Kamisato’s answer was simple.

“*Yes.*”

He was already aware.

With no surprise or other emotion in his voice, Kamisato Kakeru gathered new strength in his limp arm and swung his right hand horizontally.

More than half of the weaponry surrounding Kihara Noukan was erased.

“I came to Academy City to eradicate the Magic Gods. But before I could act, Zombie and the High Priest were defeated. I only had to think of it as a method other than my right arm that is capable of accomplishing that. Well, it was actually Ellen, Elza, and the others who did all the thinking, so I can’t act like it was all my doing.”

“Oh? So you arrived at this possibility even if only in theory? You truly have gathered some very unusual people.”

“You spoke of good and evil, like and dislike, didn’t you? From that point of view, I hate people who fall under both evil and dislike. Would that be someone like you perhaps?”

“How much do you know?”

“Not all that much. As you can see, I was beaten by Kamijou Touma. That was when I first realized it.” The bloody boy smiled. “I temporarily looked after Patricia Birdway. If not for my business with Kamijou Touma, I probably would have spent all my time on that. And my World Rejecter seems to work from the outside in. That’s why it managed to eliminate Kamijou Touma’s Imagine Breaker yet still got hit by what lay inside. It doesn’t evenly erase everything at the same time. There’s a slight time lag, unfortunately.”

“…”

“Heh. Given how you’re acting, were you not aware what your higher ups were plotting? Well, I doubt it would have fit your tastes. Sample Shoggoth? An Antarctic parasite? Ridiculous.”

World Rejecter would have worked regardless, but Imagine Breaker had negated it too.

That meant it was more than just a creature. It was related to some kind of supernatural power.

“Academy City was backing that trip to Antarctica, wasn’t it? Then maybe I should assume that was meant as a *girl trap* laid out as a surprise attack against me. Patricia would have seemed perfect for it. Without the desire to save her sister even if it meant abandoning her own life, someone with an incurable illness would dream of some unknown new world. *And due to my goddamn tendency to save anything in the shape of a girl,* I would naturally take her into the Kamisato Faction, but you had a surprise waiting to burst out like a jack-in-the-box as soon as I used World Rejecter on her. So what was it you put

inside her? To make any sense, it would have to be something that Academy City already has some trust in. Yes, for example...maybe it was discolored Dark Matter."

He clearly spoke the word "so".

The forcible sound of a dry branch breaking came from the hand on his neck.

"If I had to say whether I was irritated or not, I'd say I'm just a tad pissed. This too might have been drawn to me by this ridiculous right hand, but just this once, I'm starting to not even care."

Kamijou Touma had given a different answer.

He had said their right hands did not define them and that they were defined by how they used them.

Kamisato Kakeru could not agree.

He can't confidently say in his heart if there was something that could go beyond what had descended onto him one day.

After all, he was just the kind of normal high school boy one could find anywhere.

He was a student who had been that and wished to continue being that.

So he obeyed his normal sensibilities and spat out his next words.

"To hell with you masterminds. I won't let you rob anyone of anything else."

That boy was so afraid of his unique right hand that he did not realize this was both a fragment of and the essence of being a hero.

The golden retriever closed his eyes for a moment.

He could tell at a glance if someone was good or evil, liked or disliked.

He did so here.

"I see."

"Well, shooting the messenger might not be very helpful, but it's an issue of affiliations. If you don't like it, complain to your higher ups."

“The atmosphere around me was oddly noisy and I had trouble relaxing. Between good and evil, it was evil, and between like and dislike, I disliked it. I can see now why none of the Dawn-Colored Sunlight’s magic came into play. The heart of that same Golden-style was interfering. At the very end here, Aleister really is making me clean up after something unbelievable!!”

An incredible exchange of attacks began.

Kihara Noukan fired countless precision guided missiles, laser beams, and plasma cannons.

He used countless varieties of attack, but Kamisato only swung his right arm.

That erased it all.

It of course erased the approaching attacks, but it also destroyed the weaponry surrounding the more distant Kihara Noukan.

“It’s useless.”

Kamisato Kakeru could already see the conclusion.

His cursed right hand did not waver.

“My World Rejecter has the power to exile people to the excess region in the same timeline. It affects anyone whose conflicting desires cause them to cling to the current world while also wishing for a new world. In other words, your efforts here are useless. It doesn’t matter how much power you have or how many strategies you’ve put together.”

“_____”

“*If the one who made that power has a wavering heart that can’t focus on a single path,* then my World Rejecter will react to everything related to that individual. It will be exiled and blown away. Give up. You chose to join forces with the wrong person.”

(Did Aleister know this would happen? He set up the rails while accepting his own weaknesses and flaws, all so he could reach the conclusion that benefits him the most. This was quite the detour, but I suppose he’s finally gotten his plan back on track. It was all to create that “opposing axis” and I was only the opening act. I see. So he’s finally recovered.)

More and more containers were launched.

The shapes of the weapons themselves were different and the golden retriever's rush continued.

But he could not turn the situation around.

In fact, World Rejecter started consuming the containers in the air, before they even stabbed into the ground. Kihara Noukan gradually lost his resources and was finally stripped bare.

"The Anti-Art Attachment is an application of medical technology, not military technology. Perhaps I should call it an external cyborg attachment. And its main function is to create a link to someone else's body that allows you to remotely draw on their power. ...In other words, you are not the one fighting. You are simply carrying something to its destination. You are carrying the willpower of someone who thoroughly hates the Magic Gods."

Of course, Kihara Noukan was not just borrowing someone else's power. He was like an elite soldier that infiltrated deep behind enemy lines and risked his life to lock onto to an airstrike target with a laser sight. Also, he was wielding the secret techniques of the mysterious Aleister. A thorough understanding of that city of science was not enough. Without understanding a world that took a step or two outside of that, the violent team-up would never have worked. No one but Kihara Noukan could have hoped to pull it off.

However, that superhuman skill did not help him here.

If the person at the source of the power fit World Rejecter's conditions, all of the power enveloping Kihara Noukan would be erased.

"Give up. If you run off with your tail between your legs, I'll spare you just this once."

The dog was now just a dog.

From a distance, Kamisato slowly raised his right hand toward that loser.

He would bring true defeat to that mere dog.

"But if you have a heart wavering between a desire to cling to life and disgust for this world, then I have a question for you: *Do you wish for a new world?*"

"...Heh."

The golden retriever slowly exhaled.

His weaponry had been stripped from him, but the dog used the one remaining arm to place a cigar in his mouth as he spoke.

“It’s true my weapons might not be of any use. If I think about the path taken by the one who made and uses them, I do have to wonder if he wholeheartedly wishes for an entirely perfect plan. Between good and bad, it’s a foolishly bad, but between like and dislike, I foolishly like it.”

Kihara Noukan then added a “but”.

Aleister had implicitly told him he would lose even with the Anti-Art Attachment. And he had said he wished to see him struggle and break free of those perfect bonds of destiny.

Almost like the singularity inside a certain boy.

So Kihara Noukan cast aside reason. Logic and efficiency did not matter here.

He obeyed only the romance living in his heart.

“If you asked me, and the things that give me form, whether I wanted a new world, the answer would be no. Boy, I have intelligence. I know the original seven who gave it to me. I understand their wills and I have attempted to follow in their footsteps. So my thoughts and my personality would never stray from the path and would never hold conflicting desires when faced with the kind of salvation presented by someone who can only rely on the supernatural. *I will live and die in this world*. Whatever result that brings, I will face it, I will confirm the answer of the Kiharas that it leads me to, and I will complete the task the original seven began.”

“I see.”

Kamisato Kakeru smiled a little.

He smiled, clenched and opened his right hand, and then accepted it.

“Those around you are one thing, but you yourself are strong. That at least seems to be true.”

“Let’s do this. Until the final moment arrives.”

A moment later, the true conclusion was reached.

♦

It felt like something heavy was spinning around and around in her mind.

Even as a Kihara, her mind had gone entirely blank and she could not think.

She had stopped breathing.

She looked like a child trying to escape a scary dream.

Kihara Yuiitsu frantically ran out onto a dark road.

“Sensei!!”

She received no response.

A pool of blood spread below a barely-functioning streetlight and a silhouette was collapsed on its side in the center.

He must have put up a powerful resistance. He must not have moved a single step back. Noukan had always been a true intellectual, but his fangs were coated in dark blood. It was not his. He had bit at his opponent over and over like a wild beast.

But his own injuries were far worse. It did not look like simple punches. Yuiitsu identified them immediately using her thorough knowledge of the rules of destruction. It had likely been something like a collapsible baton. Even as Noukan had bit at his opponent’s limbs, the golden retriever had been beaten over and over.

The injuries covered his head, his body, and his legs. Every last part of his body had been brutally beaten.

Until he could no longer move.

“Uuh...uuhhh...waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Yuiitsu let out a wail.

She tore at her hair, clawed at her skin, and audibly tore her cheap suit and lab coat.

But at the same time, her researcher’s mind began running.

She immediately began her analysis.

(His heartrate and breathing are disturbed. His pupils are dilated and his entire body is convulsing irregularly. Several organs were ruptured and bones broken. His blood pressure is rapidly dropping...)

She could not bear to look directly at the truth, so she converted it to data.

She did not need to feel hatred for the one who had done this. Kihara Noukan’s vitals were more important. If something was not done, he would undoubtedly die. The blood loss was especially bad. If the oxygen supply to his brain dropped far enough, his golden retriever brain would be destroyed. That was truly fatal for a Kihara. She nearly fainted

when she saw the severe damage to the external attachments that connected to the weapons, allowed him to speak human language, and supplemented his intelligence.

She searched out all of the problem points.

Next, she worked out how to heal him.

She compared to two, calculated a more accurate timeline, and felt despair.

(I won't make it in time!!)

The destruction of his brain cells was progressing faster than any method of healing him. At this rate, he would almost certainly die. And even if he was saved, his intelligence would never return.

In that case, what was she to do?

(Yes, yes. No matter how cruel or nasty it is, I will achieve my goal. After all, I am a Kihara!!)

She held the limp, bloody dog in her arms and carried him by foot to the closest research institution.

A giant freezing facility awaited her there.

She would put him in cold sleep. That would stop the damage for the time being, but it also meant she could not heal him. She would no longer be able to speak with him. The golden retriever's time would be stopped inside that icy coffin until mankind's technological progress advanced to the point that medical technology could solve this "great problem".

It was time to say goodbye.

She gently placed the specimen on the silver coffin.

"..."

Kihara Noukan thought this was the best choice.

He felt joy in Yuiitsu's growth for immediately making this decision.

Would he next wake in a few decades, a few centuries, a few millennia, or never at all?

The odds were good that this would be his last time to speak with Kihara Yuiitsu.

What was he to tell his student?

There was a lot he wanted to say, but all of it came from his own softness. Those words would not allow her to grow. He would only create a copy of himself in her and she would never be able to progress beyond him.

So he sealed off those words he wanted to say.

Most likely, Kihara Yuiitsu would be thrown onto the front line. Or rather, the very fact that Kihara Noukan would be retiring here had been arranged as preparation for something. Aleister was making his next move in order to deal with World Rejecter. So the odds were extremely high that she would end up confronting that irregular power. The Board Chairman had asked him to break free of a complete dead-end, but it had been impossible for Kihara Noukan. It would take a much, much stronger Kihara to break free of the bonds of destiny and pave the way forward under their own power. It would take a brand new sort of Kihara who could move beyond pure logic and surpass even the untested theories.

His own regrets did not matter.

He had to think about what would be best for his student.

The golden retriever brushed aside his softness, gathered his last strength, and spoke.

“Listen, Yuiitsu-kun...”

“Sensei!!”

“I have one last thing to tell you. Become a Kihara that exceeds even me. Do not hold back for my sake. Continue beyond me. I know you can do it. I have nothing more to teach you...”

That was all.

The golden retriever truly lost consciousness this time and Kihara Yuiitsu wept like a child. Yet at the same time, her fingertips moved in isolation from her emotions. They moved with perfect accuracy and ruthlessness. The flash-freezing machine produced a heavy noise as it set to work on her beloved teacher. It looked like his life was being made a part of the machine.

She had done it.

She had done it with her own hands.

“I will do it.”

Even as she sniffled, that Kihara spoke.

When she raised her head again, a strange light filled her eyes.

“I will do it!! I will...I will become a Kihara that surpasses him. I will become a Kihara no one else can hope to match! After all, this is the task my teacher left for me!! He told me to become something *unique*[1] that goes beyond being a mere Kihara and cannot be explained with the term Kihara!!!!!”

The world of pre-established harmony crumbled around her.

The wishes of the Magic Gods did not matter.

The actions of World Rejecter which had instantly killed those Magic Gods did not matter.

“Yes, that’s right. The student must one day surpass her master. She must become someone that her surpassed teacher can be proud of.”

After the intense hellfire passed, all that remained was a calm burning *just like the lit tip of a refined cigar*.

It was a constant heat that did not flicker or burn too brightly.

She would take on the Board Chairman who seemed to know everything, Imagine Breaker who that Board Chairman was so focused on, the science side that Board Chairman belonged to, the dispute with the other side that was thought to exist, World Rejecter that had caused trouble for them all, and everything else in the world.

And even as she did so, she would not take a single step back.

“*That would be the romantic thing to do.* Isn’t that right, sensei?”

That opposing axis was being reborn in this hopeless world.

♦

In a windowless building, a “human” floated upside-down in a giant tube.

He had long silver hair and wore a green surgical gown.

That “human” who appeared masculine yet feminine, young yet aged, saintly yet sinful simply floated as always.

Everything was going according to plan.

[1] Yuiitsu means unique

Everything was back on track.

No matter how many irregularities the process may have caused, he had prepared a “game” capable of bringing everything back on track.

He did not need to think about the losses. The word “adversity” was meaningless. Just as a compressed spring only bounced back with all the more strength, a glance at the whole showed that he had come out better off than when he had started.

So this was a great success.

He had made progress with nothing to taint it. He could feel proud of what he had accomplished without worrying what anyone else thought.

And after thinking through it that far, the absurd score was actually displayed.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!”

A roar seemed to tear apart the very world.

It was contained within the windowless building and not allowed to escape.

Once, on that day when he had learned of his young daughter’s death, this “human” had left a tearstain in his journal. Now, for the first time, he truly cursed this plan that could only lead him in the best possible direction.

♦

Once upon a time, the world’s greatest magician was still just a child.

The town he lived in was a horrible place.

His mother and father who believe in god refused to understand him and his school teachers were all so mean. However, they all looked nice on the surface, so they all had influential positions in the town. While living in that garbage dump of a town, he began to look down on the god who had created such an awful world that was so easily fooled and could not punish liars.

So he decided to show them what a real god looked like.

He would find the proper rules since that pathetic god would not.

That was the starting point that later led to him joining the great Golden cabal and developing countless spells and spiritual items.

But that did not mean he was successful in everything he did.

The more he approached the answer, the more things would get in his way. The stable cabal ran afoul of infighting, his child collapsed, his wife left him, and his family fell apart. And each time he hit a stumbling block, someone was there laughing at him from somewhere.

"This is no different..."

Even so, he is still doing his very best.

He is still working to find the answer that not even god could find so that he can make the world a better place.

"This is no different than what those Magic Gods doooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!!!"

Even as he laments, shouts, is knocked down, and despairs, Aleister Crowley still continues his fight against god's rules.

AFTERWORD

If you bought each volume one by one, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

We're already fourteen novels in since the New Testament title was added. This time, I put together a story meant to investigate the character of Kamisato Kakeru, owner of World Rejecter, by using a disaster that befell the Birdway sisters. (I think most of the readers must have laughed at the idea of an Antarctic parasite as ridiculous, but then what was your first guess as to what it actually was?) You can probably already think of several characters who act as opposites to Kamijou Touma, but this time that comparison was based on the power that acts as one of the bases for his character.

Kamijou Touma should have been a normal high school boy, so what made him stray from that position?

I think the true charm of this novel was to give a satisfactory explanation of Kamisato Kakeru's history but then to have that idea rejected and destroyed.

This series has always provided the thrill of having the protagonist destroy a nicely built-up miniature garden. (Once it looks complete, it can be hard to go back and change it even if you know there's something wrong with it.) In other words, the true essence of this series is not to convince someone with a logical argument but to take that next step and use the power of emotion to destroy a fully-constructed dead-end. With Kamijou and Kamisato and with Leivinia and Patricia, there are a lot of intersecting lines and it all looks pretty complex, but the structure of the story may have actually gone back to where it all started.

But another important point might be that the school was targeted in Volume 13 and the dorm was targeted here in Volume 14. When a series keeps running for a long time, you end up creating safe areas that I suppose you could call sanctuaries. Pay special attention to the stages for the slice-of-life scenes. I think making a move on those places is a small change and a small bit of growth for me.

The destruction of the school came from the High Priest's "playfulness", but Kamisato intentionally broke into those sanctuaries. I thought that might make him a new sort of enemy for this series. (In the previous volume, he rejected the assumption that there was only one special right hand, instantly killed the seemingly absolute enemies that were Gremlin, and used the phrase "normal high school boy" in a new way. In this volume, he gave his theory about the connection between the special right hand and the relationships

with the girls and he also finished off a certain dog. I also violated a few more of this series' small sanctuaries, so if you have the time, you might enjoy searching them out.) So if he makes any further moves from now on, he might destroy some other sanctuaries. And I'm sure that would be a great shock to the hearts of Kamijou and those around him.

As Kihara Noukan said, Kamisato Kakeru is an individual who, for better or for worse, stirs up the current state of affairs and brings a new wind into the stagnant world. Just like Kamijou Touma did against the world's science side and magic side. And you must not forget that Kamijou Touma overturned massive systems such as Academy City or the Anglican Church in order to get back at them and protect someone's smile. Anyone who has been following along this long should already know that thrill.

What sanctuary will be destroyed next?

And will that choice save someone just like it did for Kamijou Touma?

Destroying and breaking things may have a negative nuance, but that is not necessarily the case in this series. After all, the protagonist's power is Imagine Breaker. What will the destruction of these sanctuaries bring? What will Kamisato try to do and how will Kamijou respond? What will Kamijou say and what will Kamisato shout back? I hope you will wait with both unease and anticipation in your hearts.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and to my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. Thanks to the Kamisato Faction, the number of characters is increasing by quite a bit once again. Sorry that keeps happening. Thank you very much for sticking with me.

I also give my thanks to the readers. I have to apologize for how this turned out if you were hoping for Niang-Niang and Nephthys to end up friends with everyone, but I was going for something that would make you think this was the right answer. You be the judge on that one.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

What did they ever do about dinner?

-Kamachi Kazuma